THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy & Science Fiction

DECEMBER

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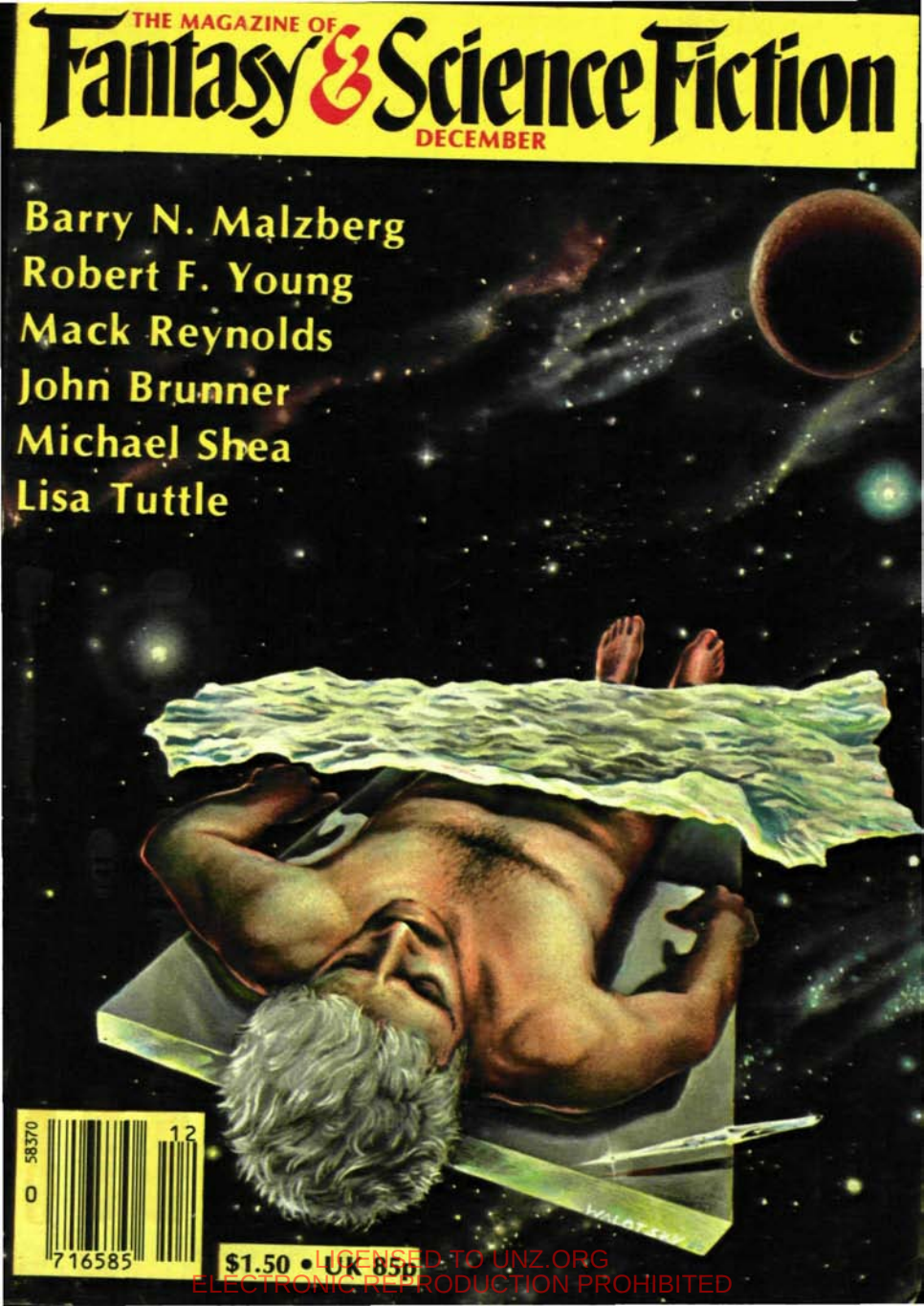

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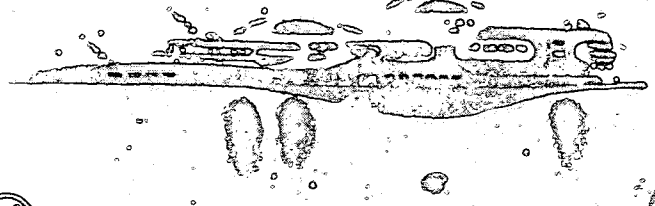

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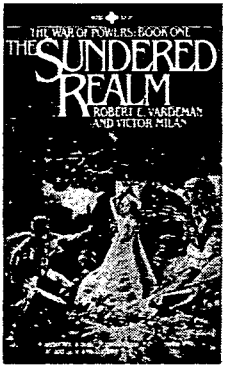

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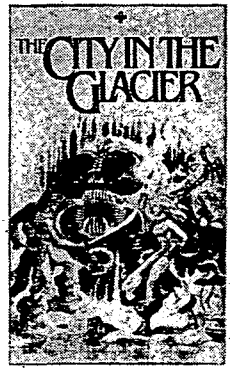

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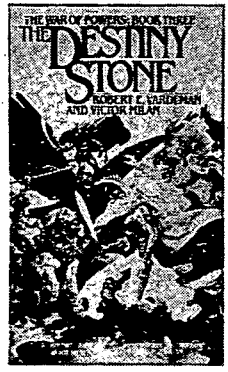

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This story — in which Dr. Carl Winters, a fifty-seven year old pathologist, arrives at a mountain town to perform autopsies on the victims of a suspicious mining explosion — is about the business of death; and so be warned that it is in some ways a grim and horrifying tale. However, it is ultimately a positive, even a touching story; and we doubt that you will soon forget Dr. Winters and what he finds in a defunct ice plant on the edge of the town known as Bailey.

The Autopsy

Dr. Winters stepped out of the tiny Greyhound station and into the midnight street that smelt of pines and the river, though the street was in the heart of the town. But then it was a town of only five main streets in breadth, and these extended scarcely a mile and a half along the rim of the gorge. Deep in that gorge though the river ran, its blurred roar flowed, perfectly distinct, between the banks of dark shop windows. The station's window showed the only light, save for a luminous clock face several doors down and a little neon beer logo two blocks farther on. When he had walked a short distance, Dr. Winters set his suitcase down, pocketed his hands, and looked at the stars — thick as cobblestones in the black gulf.

"A mountain hamlet — a mining town," he said. "Stars. No moon. We are in Bailey."

He was talking to his cancer. It was in his stomach. Since learning of it, he had developed this habit of wry communion with it. He meant to show courtesy to this uninvited guest, Death. It would not find him churlish, for that would make its victory absolute. Except, of course, that its victory would *be* absolute, with or without his ironies.

He picked up his suitcase and walked on. The starlight made faint mirrors of the windows' blackness and showed

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BY
MICHAEL SHEA

him the man who passed: lizard-lean, white-haired (at fifty-seven), a man traveling on death's business, carrying his own death in him, and even bearing death's wardrobe in his suitcase. For this was filled—aside from his medical kit and some scant necessities—with mortuary bags. The sheriff had told him on the phone of the improvisations that presently enveloped the corpses, and so the doctor had packed these, laying them in his case with bitter amusement, checking the last one's breadth against his chest before the mirror, as a woman will gauge a dress before donning it, and telling his cancer:

"Oh, yes, that's plenty roomy enough for both of us!"

The case was heavy and he stopped frequently to rest and scan the sky. What a night's work to do, probing soulless filth, eyes earthward, beneath such a ceiling of stars! It had taken five days to dig them out. The autumnal equinox had passed, but the weather here had been uniformly hot. And warmer still, no doubt, so deep in the earth.

He entered the courthouse by a side door. His heels knocked on the linoleum corridor. A door at the end of it, on which was lettered NATE CRAVEN, COUNTY SHERIFF, opened well before he reached it, and his friend stepped out to meet him.

"Damnit, Carl, you're *still* so thin they could use you for a whip. Gimme that. You're in too good a shape already. You don't need the exercise."

The case hung weightless from his hand, imparting no tilt at all to his bull shoulders. Despite his implied self-derogation, he was only moderately paunched for a man his age and size. He had a rough-hewn face and the bulk of brow, nose, and jaw made his greenish eyes look small until one engaged them and felt the snap and penetration of their intelligence. He half-filled two cups from a coffee urn and topped both off with bourbon from a bottle in his desk. When they had finished these, they had finished trading news of mutual friends. The sheriff mixed another round, and sipped from his, in a silence clearly

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prefatory to the work at hand.

"They talk about rough justice," he said. "I've sure seen it now. One of those...patients of yours that you'll be working on? He was a killer. 'Killer' don't even half say it, really. You could say that *he* got justly executed in that blast. That much was justice for damn sure. But rough as hell on those other nine. And the rough don't just stop with their being dead either. That kiss-ass boss of yours! He's breaking his god-damned back touching his toes for Fordham Mutual. How much of the picture did he give you?"

"You refer, I take it, to the estimable Coroner Waddleton of Fordham County." Dr. Winters paused to sip his drink. With a delicate flaring of his nostrils he communicated all the disgust, contempt and amusement he had felt in his four years as Pathologist in Waddleton's office. The sheriff laughed.

"Clear pictures seldom emerge from anything the coroner says," the doctor continued. "He took your name in vain. Vigorously and repeatedly. These expressions formed his opening remarks. He then developed the theme of our office's strict responsibility to the letter of the law, and of the workmen's compensation law in particular. Death benefits accrue only to the dependents of decedents whose deaths arise *out of the course of* their employment, not merely *in* the course of it. Victims of a maniacal assault, though they die on the job, are by no means necessarily compensable under the law. We then contemplated the tragic injustice of an insurance company—*any* insurance company—having to pay benefits to unentitled persons, solely through the laxity and incompetence of investigating officers. Your name came up again."

Craven uttered a bark of mirth and fury. "The impartial public servant! Ha! The impartial brown-nose, flim-flam and bullshit man is what he *is*. Ten to one, Fordham Mutual will slip out of it *without* his help, and those widows won't see a goddamn nickel."

Words were an insufficient vent; the sheriff turned and spat into his wastebasket. He drained his cup, and sighed. "I beg your pardon, Carl. We've been five days digging those men out and the last two days sifting half that mountain for explosive traces, with those insurance investigators hanging on our elbows, and the most they could say was that there was 'strong presumptive evidence' of a bomb. Well, I don't budge for that because I don't have to. Waddleton can shove his 'extraordinary circumstances.' If you don't find anything in those bodies, then that's all the autopsy there is to it, and they get buried right here where their families want 'em."

The doctor was smiling at his friend. He finished his cup and spoke with his previous wry detachment, as if the sheriff had not interrupted.

"The honorable coroner then spoke

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with remarkable volubility on the subject of Autopsy Consent forms and the malicious subversion of private citizens by vested officers of the law. He had, as it happened, a sheaf of such forms on his desk, all signed, all with a rider clause typed in above the signatures. A cogent paragraph. It had, among its other qualities, the property of turning the coroner's face purple when he read it aloud. He read it aloud to me three times. It appeared that the survivors' consent was contingent on two conditions: that the autopsy be performed *in locem mortis*, that is to say in Bailey, and that only if the coroner's pathologist found concrete evidence of homicide should the decedents be subject either to removal from Bailey or to further necropsy. It was well written. I remember wondering who wrote it."

The sheriff nodded musingly. He took Dr. Winters' empty cup, set it by his own, filled both two-thirds with bourbon, and added a splash of coffee to the doctor's. The two friends exchanged a level stare, rather like poker players in the clinch. The sheriff regarded his cup, sipped from it.

"*In locem mortis*. What-all does that mean exactly?"

"'In the place of death'."

"Oh. Freshen that up for you?"

"I've just started it, thank you."

Both men laughed, paused, and laughed again, some might have said immoderately.

"He all but told me that I *had* to find something to compel a second autopsy," the doctor said at length. "He would have sold his soul—or taken out a second mortgage on it—for a mobile x-ray unit. He's right of course. If those bodies have trapped any bomb fragments, that would be the surest and quickest way of finding them. It still amazes me your Dr. Parsons could let his x-ray go unfixed for so long."

"He sets bones, stitches wounds, writes prescriptions, and sends anything tricky down the mountain. Just barely manages that. Drunks don't get much done."

"*He's gotten that bad?*"

"He hangs on and no more. Waddleton was right there, not deputizing him pathologist. I doubt he could find a cannonball in a dead rat. I wouldn't say it where it could hurt him, as long as he's still managing, but everyone here knows it. His patients sort of look after *him* half the time. But Waddleton would have sent you, no matter who was here. Nothing but his best for party contributors like Fordham Mutual."

The doctor looked at his hands and shrugged. "So. There's a killer in the batch. *Was* there a bomb?"

Slowly, the sheriff planted his elbows on the desk and pressed his hands against his temples, as if the question had raised a turbulence of memories. For the first time the doctor—half harkening throughout to the never-quite-muted stirrings of the death within him—saw his friend's ex-

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haustion: the tremor of hand, the bruised look under the eyes.

"I'm going to give you what I have, Carl. I told you I don't think you'll find a damn thing in those bodies. You're probably going to end up assuming what I do about it, but assuming is as far as anyone's going to get with this one. It is truly one of those Nightmare Specials that the good Lord tortures lawmen with and then hides the answers to forever.

"All right then. About two months ago, we had a man disappear—Ronald Hanley. Mine worker, rock-steady, family man. He didn't come home one night, and we never found a trace of him. OK, that happens sometimes. About a week later, the lady that ran the laundromat, Sharon Starker, *she* disappeared, no trace. We got edgy then. I made an announcement on the local radio about a possible weirdo at large, spelled out special precautions everybody should take. We put both our squadcars on the night beat, and by day we set to work knocking on every door in town collecting alibis for the two times of disappearance.

"No good. Maybe you're fooled by this uniform and think I'm a law officer, protector of the people, and all that? A natural mistake. A lot of people were fooled. In less than seven weeks, six people vanished, just like that. Me and my deputies might as well have stayed in bed round the clock, for all the good we did." The sheriff drained his cup.

"Anyway, at last we got lucky. Don't get me wrong now. We didn't go all hog-wild and actually prevent a crime or anything. But we *did* find a body—except it wasn't the body of any of the seven people that had disappeared. We'd took to combing the woods nearest town, with temporary deputies from the miners to help. Well, one of those boys was out there with us last week. It was hot—like it's been for a while now—and it was real quiet. He heard this buzzing noise and looked around for it, and he saw a bee-swarm up in the crotch of a tree. Except he was smart enough to know that that's not usual around here—bee hives. So it wasn't bees. It was bluebottle flies, a god-damned big cloud of them, all over a bundle that was wrapped in a tarp."

The sheriff studied his knuckles. He had, in his eventful life, occasionally met men literate enough to understand his last name and rash enough to be openly amused by it, and the knuckles—scarred knobs—were eloquent of his reactions. He looked back into his old friend's eyes.

"We got that thing down and unwrapped it. Billy Lee Davis, one of my deputies, he was in Viet Nam, been near some bad, bad things and held on. Billy Lee blew his lunch all over the ground when we unwrapped that thing. It was a man. Some of a man. We knew he'd stood six-two because all the bones were there, and he'd probably weighed between two fifteen

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and two twenty-five, but he folded up no bigger than a big-size laundry package. Still had his face, both shoulders, and the left arm, but all the rest was clean. It wasn't animal work. It was knife work, all the edges neat as butcher cuts. Except butchered meat, even when you drain it all you can, will bleed a good deal afterwards, and there wasn't one god-damned drop of blood on the tarp, nor in that meat. It was just as pale as fish meat."

Deep in his body's center, the doctor's cancer touched him. Not a ravening attack—it sank one fang of pain, questioningly, into new, untasted flesh, probing the scope for its appetite there. He disguised his tremor with a shake of the head.

"A cache, then."

The sheriff nodded. "Like you might keep a potroast in the icebox for making lunches. I took some pictures of his face, then we put him back and erased our traces. Two of the miners I'd deputized did a lot of hunting, were woods-smart. So I left them on the first watch. We worked out positions and cover for them, and drove back.

"We got right on tracing him, sent out descriptions to every town within a hundred miles. He was no one I'd ever seen in Bailey, nor anyone else either, it began to look like, after we'd combed the town all day with the photos. Then, out of the blue, Billy Lee Davis smacks himself on the forehead and says, 'Sheriff, *I* seen this man somewhere in town, and not long ago!'

"He'd been shook all day since throwing up, and then all of a sudden he just snapped to. Was dead sure. Except he couldn't remember where or when. We went over and over it and he tried and tried. It got to where I wanted to grab him by the ankles and hang him upside down and shake him till it dropped out of him. But it was no damn use. Just after dark we went back to that tree—we'd worked out a place to hide the cars and a route to it through the woods. When we were close we walkie-talkied the men we'd left for an all-clear to come up. No answer at all. And when we got there, all that was left of our trap was the tree. No body, no tarp, no Special Assistant Deputies. Nothing."

This time Dr. Winters poured the coffee and bourbon. "Too much coffee," the sheriff muttered, but drank anyway. "Part of me wanted to chew nails and break necks. And part of me was scared shitless. When we got back I got on the radio station again and made an emergency broadcast and then had the man at the station rebroadcast it every hour. Told everyone to do everything in groups of three, to stay together at night in threes at least, to go out little as possible, keep armed and keep checking up on each other. It had such a damn-fool sound to it, but just pairing-up was no protection if half of one of those pairs was the killer. I deputized more men and put them on the streets to beef up the night patrol.

"It was next morning that things

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broke. The sheriff of Rakehell called—he's over in the next county. He said our corpse sounded a lot like a man named Abel Dougherty, a mill-hand with Con Wood over there. I left Billy Lee in charge and drove right out.

"This Dougherty had a cripple older sister he always checked back to by phone whenever he left town for long, a habit no one knew about, probably embarrassed him. Sheriff Peck there only found out about it when the woman called him, said her brother'd been four days gone for vacation and not rung her once. Without that Peck might not've thought of Dougherty just from our description, though the photo I showed him clinched it, and one would've reached him by mail soon enough. Well, he'd hardly set it down again when a call came through for me. It was Billy Lee. He'd remembered.

"When he'd seen Dougherty was the Sunday night three days before we found him. Where he'd seen him was the Trucker's Tavern outside the north end of town. The man had made a stir by being jolly drunk and latching onto a miner who was drinking there, man named Joe Allen, who'd started at the mine about two months back. Dougherty kept telling him that he wasn't Joe Allen, but Dougherty's old buddy named Sykes that had worked with him at Con Wood for a coon's age, and what the hell kind of joke was this, come have a beer old buddy and tell me why you took off so sudden and what the hell you been doing with yourself.

"Allen took it laughing. Dougherty'd clap him on the shoulder, Allen'd clap him right back and make every kind of joke about it, say 'Give this man another beer, I'm standing in for a long-lost friend of his.' Dougherty was so big and loud and stubborn, Billy Lee was worried about a fight starting, and he wasn't the only one worried. But this Joe Allen was a natural good ol' boy, handled it perfect. We'd checked him out weeks back along with everyone else, and he was real popular with the other miners. Finally Dougherty swore he was going to take him on to another bar to help celebrate the vacation Dougherty was starting out on. Joe Allen got up grinning, said god damn it, he couldn't accommodate Dougherty by being this fellow Sykes, but he could sure as hell have a glass with any serious drinking man that was treating. He went out with him, and gave everyone a wink as he left, to the general satisfaction of the audience."

Craven paused. Dr. Winters met his eyes and knew his thought, two images: the jolly wink that roused the room to laughter, and the thing in the tarp aboil with bright blue flies.

"It was plain enough for me," the sheriff said. "I told Billy Lee to search Allen's room at the Skettles' boarding house and then go straight to the mine and take him. We could fine-polish things once we had him. Since I was

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already in Rakehell, I saw to some of the loose ends before I started back. I went with sheriff Peck down to Con Wood and we found a picture of Eddie Sykes in the personnel files. I'd seen Joe Allen often enough, and it was his picture in that file.

"We found out Sykes lived alone, was an on-again, off-again worker, private in his comings and goings, and hadn't been around for a while. But one of the sawyers there could be pretty sure of when Sykes left Rakehell because he'd gone to Sykes' cabin the morning after a big meteor shower they had out there about nine weeks back, since some thought the shower might have reached the ground, and not far from Sykes' side of the mountain. He wasn't in that morning, and the sawyer hadn't seen him since.

"It looked sewed up. It *was* sewed up. After all those weeks, I was less than a mile out of Bailey, had the pedal floored. Full of rage and revenge. I felt...like a *bullet*, like I was one big thirty-caliber slug that was going to go right through that blood-sucking cannibal, tear the whole truth right out of his heart, enough to hang him a hundred times. That was the closest I got. So close that I *heard* it when it all blew to shit.

"I sound squirrelly. I know I do. Maybe all this gave me something I'll never shake off. We had to put together what happened. Billy Lee didn't have my other deputy with him. Travis was out with some men on the mountain dragnetting around that tree for clues. By luck, he was back at the car when Billy Lee was trying to raise him. He said he'd just been through Allen's room and had got something we could maybe hold him on. It was a sphere, half again big as a basketball, heavy, made of something that wasn't metal or glass but was a little like both. He could half-see into it and it looked to be full of some kind of circuitry and components. If someone tried to spring Allen, we could make a theft rap out of this thing, or say we suspected it was a bomb. Jesus! Anyway, he said it was the only strange thing he found, but it was plenty strange. He told Travis to get up to the mine for back-up. He'd be there first and should already have Allen by the time Travis arrived.

"Tierney, the shift boss up there, had an assistant that told us the rest. Billy Lee parked behind the offices where the men in the yard wouldn't see the car. He went upstairs to arrange the arrest with Tierney. They got half a dozen men together. Just as they came out of the building, they saw Allen take off running from the squadcar with the sphere under his arm.

"The whole compound's fenced in and Tierney'd already phoned to have all the gates shut. Allen zigged and zagged some but caught on quick to the trap. The sphere slowed him, but he still had a good lead. He hesitated a minute and then ran straight for the main shaft. A cage was just going down with a crew, and he risked every

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bone in him jumping down after it, but he got safe on top. By the time they got to the switches, the cage was down to the second level, and Allen and the crew had got out. Tierney got it back up. Billy Lee ordered the rest back to get weapons and follow, and him and Tierney rode the cage right back down. And about two minutes later half the god-damned mine blew up."

The sheriff stopped as if cut off, his lips parted to say more, his eyes registering for perhaps the hundredth time his amazement that there was no more, that the weeks of death and mystification ended here, with this split-second recapitulation: more death, more answerless dark, sealing all.

"Nate."

"What."

"Wrap it up and go to bed. I don't need your help. You're dead on your feet."

"I'm not on my feet. And I'm coming along."

"Give me a picture of the victims' position relative to the blast. I'm going to work and you're going to bed."

The sheriff shook his head absently. "They're mining in shrinkage stopes. The adits—levels—branch off lateral from the vertical shaft. From one level they hollow out overhand up to the one above. Scoop out big chambers and let most of the broken rock stay inside so they can stand on the heaps to cut the ceilings higher. They leave sections of support wall between stopes, and those men were buried several stopes in from the shaft. The cave-in killed *them*. The mountain just folded them up in their own hill of tailings. No kind of fragments reached them. I'm dead sure. The only ones they *found* were of some standard charges that the main blast set off, and those didn't even get close. The big one blew out where the adit joined the shaft, right where, and right when Billy Lee and Tierney got out of the cage. And there is *nothing* left there, Carl. No sphere, no cage, no Tierney, no Billy Lee Davis. Just rock blown fine as flour."

Dr. Winters nodded and, after a moment, stood up.

"Come on, Nate. I've got to get started. I'll be lucky to have even a few of them done before morning. Drop me off and go to sleep, till then at least. You'll still be there to witness most of the work."

The sheriff rose, took up the doctor's suitcase, and led him out of the office without a word, concession in his silence.

The patrol car was behind the building. The doctor saw a crueller beauty in the stars than he had an hour before. They got in, and Craven swung them out onto the empty street. The doctor opened the window and harkened, but the motor's surge drowned out the river sound. Before the thrust of their headlights, ranks of old-fash-

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ioned parking meters sprouted shadows tall across the sidewalks, shadows which shrank and were cut down by the lights' passage. The sheriff said:

"All those extra dead. For nothing! Not even to...*feed* him! If it *was* a bomb, and he made it, he'd know how powerful it was. He wouldn't try some stupid escape stunt with it. And how did he even know the thing was there? We worked it out that Allen was just ending a shift, but he wasn't even up out of the ground before Billy Lee'd parked out of sight."

"Let it rest, Nate. I want to hear more, but after you've slept. I know you. All the photos will be there, and the report complete, all the evidence neatly boxed and carefully described. When I've looked things over I'll know exactly how to proceed by myself."

Bailey had neither hospital nor morgue, and the bodies were in a defunct ice-plant on the edge of town. A generator had been brought down from the mine, lighting improvised, and the refrigeration system reactivated. Dr. Parsons' office, and the tiny examining room that served the sheriff's station in place of a morgue, had furnished this makeshift with all the equipment that Dr. Winters would need beyond what he carried with him. A quarter-mile outside the main body of the town, they drew up to it. Tree-flanked, unneighbored by any other structure, it was a double building; the smaller half—the office—was illuminated. The bodies would be in the big, windowless refrigerator segment. Craven pulled up beside a second squadcar parked near the office door. A short, rake-thin man wearing a large white stetson got out of the car and came over. Craven rolled down his window.

"Trav: This here's Dr. Winters."

"'Lo, Nate. Dr. Winters. Everything's shipshape inside. Felt more comfortable out here. Last of those newshounds left two hours ago."

"They sure do hang on. You take off now, Trav. Get some sleep and be back at sunup. What temperature we getting?"

The pale stetson, far clearer in the starlight than the shadow-face beneath it, wagged dubiously. "Thirty-six. She won't get lower—some kind of leak."

"That should be cold enough," the doctor said.

Travis drove off and the sheriff unlocked the padlock on the office door. Waiting behind him, Dr. Winters heard the river again—a cold balm, a whisper of freedom—and overlying this, the stutter and soft snarl of the generator behind the building, a gnawing, remorseless sound that somehow fed the obscure anguish which the other soothed. They went in.

The preparations had been thoughtful and complete. "You can wheel 'em out of the fridge on this and do the examining in here," the sheriff said, indicating a table and a gurney. "You should find all the gear you need

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on this big table here, and you can write up your reports on that desk. The phone's not hooked up—there's a pay phone at that last gas station if you have to call me."

The doctor nodded, checking over the material on the larger table: scalpels, post-mortem and cartilage knives, intestine scissors, rib shears, forceps, probes, mallet and chisels, a blade saw and electric bone saw, scale, jars for specimens, needles and suture, sterilizer, gloves.... Beside this array were a few boxes and envelopes with descriptive sheets attached, containing the photographs and such evidentiary objects as had been found associated with the bodies.

"Excellent," he muttered.

"The overhead light's fluorescent, full spectrum or whatever they call it. Better for colors. There's a pint of decent bourbon in that top desk drawer. Ready to look at 'em?"

"Yes."

The sheriff unbarred and slid back the big metal door to the refrigeration chamber. Icy, tainted air boiled out of the doorway. The light within was dimmer than that provided in the office—a yellow gloom wherein ten oblong heaps lay on trestles.

The two stood silent for a time, their stillness a kind of unpremeditated homage paid the eternal mystery at its threshold. As if the cold room were in fact a shrine, the doctor found a peculiar awe in the row of veiled forms. The awful unison of their dying, the titan's grave that had been made for them, conferred on them a stern authority, Death's chosen Ones. His stomach hurt, and he found he had his hand pressed to his abdomen. He glanced at Craven and was relieved to see that his friend, staring wearily at the bodies, had missed the gesture.

"Nate. Help me uncover them."

Starting at opposite ends of the row, they stripped the tarps off and piled them in a corner. Both were brusque now, not pausing over the revelation of the swelled, pulpy faces—most three-lipped with the gaseous burgeoning of their tongues—and the fat, livid hands sprouting from the filthy sleeves. But at one of the bodies Craven stopped. The doctor saw him look, and his mouth twist. Then he flung the tarp on the heap and moved to the next trestle.

When they came out Dr. Winters took out the bottle and glasses Craven had put in the desk, and they had a drink together. The sheriff made as if he would speak, but shook his head and sighed.

"I *will* get some sleep, Carl. I'm getting crazy thoughts with this thing." The doctor wanted to ask those thoughts. Instead he laid a hand on his friend's shoulder.

"Go home, Sheriff Craven. Take off the badge and lie down. The dead won't run off on you. We'll all still be here in the morning."

* * *

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When the sound of the patrol car faded, the doctor stood listening to the generator's growl and the silence of the dead, resurgent now. Both the sound and the silence seemed to mock him. The after-echo of his last words made him uneasy. He said to his cancer:

"What about it, dear colleague? We *will* still be here tomorrow? All of us?"

He smiled, but felt an odd discomfort, as if he had ventured a jest in company and roused a hostile silence. He went to the refrigerator door, rolled it back, and viewed the corpses in their ordered rank, with their strange tribunal air. "What, sirs?" he murmured. "Do you judge me? Just who is to examine whom tonight, if I may ask?"

He went back into the office, where his first step was to examine the photographs made by the sheriff, in order to see how the dead had lain at their uncovering. The earth had seized them with terrible suddenness. Some crouched, some partly stood, others sprawled in crazy, free-fall postures. Each successive photo showed more of the jumble as the shovels continued their work between shots. The doctor studied them closely, noting the identifications inked on the bodies as they came completely into view.

One man, Roger Willet, had died some yards from the main cluster. It appeared he had just straggled into the stope from the adit at the moment of the explosion. He should thus have received, more directly than any of the others, the shockwaves of the blast. If bomb fragments were to be found in any of the corpses, Mr. Willet's seemed likeliest to contain them. Dr. Winters pulled on a pair of surgical gloves.

He lay at one end of the line of trestles. He wore a thermal shirt and overalls that were strikingly new beneath the filth of burial. Their tough fabrics jarred with that of his flesh—blue, swollen, seeming easily torn or burst, like ripe fruit. In life Willet had grease-combed his hair. Now it was a sculpture of dust, spikes and whorls shaped by the head's last grindings against the mountain that clenched it.

Rigor had come and gone—Willet rolled laxly onto the gurney. As the doctor wheeled him past the others, he felt a slight self-consciousness. The sense of some judgment flowing from the dead assembly—unlike most such vagrant emotional embellishments of experience—had an odd tenacity in him. This stubborn unease began to irritate him with himself, and he moved more briskly.

He put Willet on the examining table and cut the clothes off him with shears, storing the pieces in an evidence box. The overalls were soiled with agonal waste expulsions. The doctor stared a moment with unwilling pity at his naked subject.

"You won't ride down to Fordham in any case," he said to the corpse. "Not unless I find something pretty damned obvious." He pulled his gloves

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tighter and arranged his implements.

Waddleton had said more to him than he had reported to the sheriff. The doctor was to find, and forcefully to record that he had found, strong "indications" absolutely requiring the decedents' removal to Fordham for x-ray and an exhaustive second post-mortem. The doctor's continued employment with the Coroner's Office depended entirely on his compliance in this. He had received this stipulation with a silence Waddleton had not thought it necessary to break. His present resolution was all but made at that moment. Let the obvious be taken as such. If the others showed as plainly as Willet did the external signs of death by asphyxiation, they would receive no more than a thorough external exam. Willet he would examine internally as well, merely to establish in depth for this one what should appear obvious in all. Otherwise, only when the external exam revealed a clearly anomalous feature—and clear and suggestive it must be—would he look deeper.

He rinsed the caked hair in a basin, poured the sediment into a flask and labeled it. Starting with the scalp, he began a minute scrutiny of the body's surfaces, recording his observations as he went.

The characteristic signs of asphyxial death were evident, despite the complicating effects of autolysis and putrefaction. The eyeballs' bulge and the tongue's protrusion were by now at least partly due to gas pressure as well as the mode of death, but the latter organ was clamped between locked teeth, leaving little doubt as to that mode. The coloration of degenerative change—a greenish-yellow tint, a darkening and mapping-out of superficial veins—was marked, but not sufficient to obscure the blue of syanosis on the face and neck, nor the pinpoint hemorrhages freckling neck, chest, and shoulders. From the mouth and nose the doctor scraped matter he was confident was the blood-tinged mucous typically ejected in the airless agony.

He began to find a kind of comedy in his work. What a buffoon death made of a man! A blue, pop-eyed, three-lipped thing. And there was himself, his curious, solicitous intimacy with this clownish carrion. Excuse me, Mr. Willet, while I probe this laceration. How does it feel when I do this? Nothing? Nothing at all? Fine, now what about these nails. Split them clawing at the earth, did you? Yes. A nice bloodblister under this thumbnail I see—got it on the job a few days before your accident no doubt? Remarkable calluses here, still quite tough....

The doctor looked for an unanalytic moment at the hands—puffed, dark paws, gestureless, having renounced all touch and grasp. He felt the wastage of the man concentrated in the hands. The painful futility of the body's fine articulation when it is seen in death—this poignancy he had long

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learned not to acknowledge when he worked. But now he let it move him a little. This Roger Willet, plodding to his work one afternoon, had suddenly been scrapped, crushed to a nonfunctional heap of perishable materials. It simply happened that his life had chanced to move too close to the passage of a more powerful life, one of those inexorable and hungry lives that leave human wreckage—known or undiscovered—in their wakes. Bad luck, Mr. Willet. Naturally, we feel very sorry about this. But this Joe Allen, your co-worker. Apparently he was some sort of...cannibal. It's complicated. We don't understand it all. But the fact is we have to dismantle you now to a certain extent. There's really no hope of your using these parts of yourself again, I'm afraid. Ready now?

The doctor proceeded to the internal exam with a vague eagerness for Willet's fragmentation, for the disarticulation of that sadness in his natural form. He grasped Willet by the jaw and took up the post-mortem knife. He sank its point beneath the chin and began the long, gently sawing incision that opened Willet from throat to groin.

In the painstaking separation of the body's laminae Dr. Winters found absorption and pleasure. And yet throughout he felt, marginal but insistent, the movement of a stream of irrelevant images. These were of the building that contained him, and of the night containing it. As from outside, he saw the plant—bleached planks, iron roofing—and the trees crowding it, all in starlight, a ghost-town image. And he saw the refrigerator vault beyond the wall as from within, feeling the stillness of murdered men in a cold, yellow light. And at length a question formed itself, darting in and out of the weave of his concentration as the images did: Why did he still feel, like some stir of the air, that sense of mute vigilance surrounding his action, furtively touching his nerves with its inquiry as he worked? He shrugged, overtly angry now. Who else was attending but Death? Wasn't he Death's hireling, and this Death's place? Then let the master look on.

Peeling back Willet's cover of hemorrhage-stippled skin, Dr. Winters read the corpse with an increasing dispassion, a mortuary text. He confined his inspection to the lungs and mediastinum and found there unequivocal testimony to Willet's asphyxial death. The pleurae of the lungs exhibited the expected ecchymoses—bruised spots in the glassy, enveloping membrane. Beneath, the polyhedral surface lobules of the lungs themselves were bubbled and blistered—the expected interstitial emphysema. The lungs, on section, were intensely and bloodily congested. The left half of the heart he found contracted and empty, while the right was overdistended and engorged with dark blood, as were the large veins of the

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upper mediastinum. It was a classic picture of death by suffocation, and at length the doctor, with needle and suture, closed up the text again.

He returned the corpse to the gurney and draped one of his mortuary bags over it in the manner of a shroud. When he had help in the morning, he would weigh the bodies on a platform scale the office contained and afterwards bag them properly. He came to the refrigerator door, and hesitated. He stared at the door, not moving, not understanding why.

Run. Get out, now.

The thought was his own, but it came to him so urgently he turned around as if someone behind him had spoken. Across the room a thin man in smock and gloves, his eyes shadows, glared at the doctor from the black windows. Behind the man was a shrouded cart, behind that, a wide metal door.

Quietly, wonderingly, the doctor asked, "Run from what?" The eyeless man in the glass was still half-crouched, afraid.

Then, a moment later, the man straightened, threw back his head, and laughed. The doctor walked to the desk and sat down shoulder to shoulder with him. He pulled out the bottle and they had a drink together, regarding each other with identical bemused smiles. Then the doctor said, "Let me pour you another. You need it old fellow. It makes a man himself again."

Nevertheless his re-entry of the vault was difficult, toilsome, each step seeming to require a new summoning of the will to move. In the freezing half-light all movement felt like defiance. His body lagged behind his craving to be quick, to be done with this molestation of the gathered dead. He returned Willet to his pallet and took his neighbor. The name on the tag wired to his boot was Ed Moses. Dr. Winters wheeled him back to the office and closed the big door behind him.

With Moses his work gained momentum. He expected to perform no further internal necropsies. He thought of his employer, rejoicing now in his seeming-submission to Waddleton's ultimatum. The impact would be dire. He pictured the coroner in shock, a sheaf of Pathologist's Reports in one hand, and smiled.

Waddleton could probably make a plausible case for incomplete examination. Still, a pathologist's discretionary powers were not well-defined. Many good ones would approve the adequacy of the doctor's method, given his working conditions. The inevitable litigation with a coalition of compensation claimants would be strenuous and protracted. Win or lose, Waddleton's venal devotion to the insurance company's interest would be abundantly displayed. Further, immediately on his dismissal the doctor would formally disclose its occult cause to the press. A libel action would ensue which he would have as little cause to fear as he

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had to fear his firing. Both his savings and the lawsuit would long outlast his life.

Externally, Ed Moses exhibited a condition as typically asphyxial as Willet's had been, with no slightest mark of fragment entry. The doctor finished his report and returned Moses to the vault, his movements brisk and precise. His unease was all but gone. That queasy stirring of the air—had he really felt it? It had been, perhaps, some new reverberation of the death at work in him, a psychic shudder of response to the cancer's stealthy probing for his life. He brought out the body next to Moses in the line.

Walter Lou Jackson was big, 6'2" from heel to crown, and would surely weigh out at more than two hundred pounds. He had writhed mightily against his million-ton coffin with an agonal strength that had torn his face and hands. Death had mauled him like a lion. The doctor set to work.

His hands were fully themselves now—fleet, exact, intricately testing the corpse's character as other fingers might explore a keyboard for its latent melodies. And the doctor watched them with an old pleasure, one of the few that had never failed him, his mind at one remove from their busy intelligence. All the hard deaths! A worldful of them, time without end. Lives wrenched kicking from their snug meat-frames. Walter Lou Jackson had died very hard. Joe Allen brought this on you, Mr. Jackson. We think it was part of his attempt to escape the law.

But what a botched flight! The unreason of it—more than baffling—was eerie in its colossal futility. Beyond question, Allen had been cunning. A ghoul with a psychopath's social finesse. A good old boy who could make a tavernful of men laugh with delight while he cut his victim from their midst, make them applaud his exit with the prey, who stepped jovially into the darkness with murder at his side clapping him on the shoulder. Intelligent, certainly, with a strange technical sophistication as well, suggested by the sphere. Then what of the lunacy yet more strongly suggested by the same object? In the sphere was concentrated all the lethal mystery of Bailey's long nightmare.

Why the explosion? Its location implied an ambush for Allen's pursuers, a purposeful detonation. Had he aimed at a limited cave-in from which he schemed some inconceivable escape? Folly enough in this—far more if, as seemed sure, Allen had made the bomb himself, for then he would have to know its power was grossly inordinate to the need.

But if it was not a bomb, had a different function and only incidentally an explosive potential, Allen might underestimate the blast. It appeared the object was somehow remotely monitored by him, for the timing of events showed he had gone straight for it the instant he emerged from the

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shaft—shunned the bus waiting to take his shift back to town and made a beeline across the compound for a patrol car that was hidden from his view by the office building. This suggested something more complex than a mere explosive device, something, perhaps, whose destruction was itself more Allen's aim than the explosion produced thereby.

The fact that he risked the sphere's retrieval at all pointed to this interpretation. For the moment he sensed its presence at the mine, he must have guessed that the murder investigation had led to its discovery and removal from his room. But then, knowing himself already liable to the extreme penalty, why should Allen go to such lengths to recapture evidence incriminatory of a lesser offense, possession of an explosive device?

Then grant that the sphere was something more, something instrumental to his murders that could guarantee a conviction he might otherwise evade. Still, his gambit made no sense. Since the sphere—and thus the lawmen he could assume to have taken it—were already at the mine office, he must expect the compound to be sealed at any moment. Meanwhile, the gate was open, escape into the mountains a strong possibility for a man capable of stalking and destroying two experienced and well-armed woodsmen lying in ambush for him. Why had he all but insured his capture to weaken a case against himself that his escape would have rendered irrelevant? Dr. Winters saw his fingers, like a hunting pack round a covert, converge on a small puncture wound below Walter Lou Jackson's xiphoid process, between the eighth ribs.

His left hand touched its borders, the fingers' inquiry quick and tender. The right hand introduced a probe, and both together eased it into the wound. It inched unobstructed deep into the body, curving upwards through the diaphragm towards the heart. The doctor's own heart accelerated. He watched his hands move to record the observation, watched them pause, watched them return to their survey of the corpse, leaving pen and page untouched.

Inspection revealed no further anomaly. All else he observed the doctor recorded faithfully, wondering throughout at the distress he felt. When he had finished, he understood it. Its cause was not the discovery of an entry wound that might bolster Waddleton's case. For the find had, within moments, revealed to him that, should he encounter anything he thought to be a mark of fragment penetration, he was going to ignore it. The damage Joe Allen had done was going to end here, with this last grand slaughter, and would not extend to the impoverishment of his victims' survivors. No more internals. The externals, will-they nill-they, would from now on explicitly contraindicate the need for them.

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The problem was that he did not believe the puncture in Jackson's thorax *was* a mark of fragment entry. Why? And, finding no answer to this question, why was he, once again, afraid? Slowly, he signed the report on Jackson, set it aside, and took up the post-mortem knife.

First the long, sawing slice, unzippering the mortal overcoat. Next, two great, square flaps of flesh reflected, scrolled laterally to the armpits' line, disrobing the chest: one hand grasping the flap's skirt, the other sweeping beneath it with the knife, flensing through the glassy tissue that joined it to the chest-wall, and shaving all muscles from their anchorages to bone and cartilage beneath. Then the dismantling of the strong-box within. Rib-shears—so frank and forward a tool, like a gardener's. The steel beak bit through each rib's gristle anchor to the sternum's centerplate. At the sternum's crownpiece the collarbones' ends were knifed, pried, and sprung free from their sockets. The coffer unhasped, unhinged, a knife teased beneath the lid and levered it off.

Some minutes later the doctor straightened up and stepped back from his subject. He moved almost drunkenly, and his age seemed scored more deeply in his face. With loathing haste he stripped his gloves off. He went to the desk, sat down, and poured another drink. If there was something like horror in his face, there was also a hardening in his mouth's line, and the muscles of his jaw. He spoke to his glass: "So be it, your Excellency. Something new for your humble servant. Testing my nerve?"

Jackson's pericardium, the shapely capsule containing his heart, should have been all but hidden between the big, blood-fat loaves of his lungs. The doctor had found it fully exposed, the lungs flanking it wrinkled lumps less than a third their natural bulk. Not only they, but the left heart and the superior mediastinal veins—all the regions that should have been grossly engorged with blood—were utterly drained of it.

The doctor swallowed his drink and got out the photographs again. He found that Jackson had died on his stomach across the body of another worker, with the upper part of a third trapped between them. Neither these two subjacent corpses nor the surrounding earth showed any stain of a blood loss that must have amounted to two liters.

Possibly the pictures, by some trick of shadow, had failed to pick it up. He turned to the Investigator's Report, where Craven would surely have mentioned any significant amounts of bloody earth uncovered during the disinterment. The sheriff recorded nothing of the kind. Dr. Winters returned to the pictures.

Ronald Pollack, Jackson's most intimate associate in the grave, had died on his back, beneath and slightly askew of Jackson, placing most of their

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torsos in contact, save where the head and shoulder of the third interposed. It seemed inconceivable Pollock's clothing should lack any trace of such massive drainage from a death mate thus embraced.

The doctor rose abruptly, pulled on fresh gloves, and returned to Jackson. His hands showed a more brutal speed now, closing the great incision temporarily with a few widely spaced sutures. He replaced him in the vault and brought out Pollock, striding, heaving hard at the dead shapes in the shifting of them, thrusting always—so it seemed to him—just a step ahead of urgent thoughts he did not want to have, deformities that whispered at his back, emitting faint, chill gusts of putrid breath. He shook his head—denying, delaying—and pushed the new corpse onto the worktable. The scissors undressed Pollock in greedy bites.

But at length, when he had scanned each scrap of fabric and found nothing like the stain of blood, he came to rest again, relinquishing that simplest, desired resolution he had made such haste to reach. He stood at the instrument table, not seeing it, submitting to the approach of the half-formed things at his mind's periphery.

The revelation of Jackson's shriveled lungs had been more than a shock. He had felt a stab of panic too, in fact that same curiously explicit terror of this place that had urged him to flee earlier. He acknowledged now that the germ of that quickly suppressed terror had been a premonition of this failure to find any trace of the missing blood. Whence the premonition? It had to do with a problem he had steadfastly refused to consider: the mechanics of so complete a drainage of the lungs' densely reticulated vascular structure. Could the earth's crude pressure by itself work so thoroughly, given only a single vent both slender and strangely curved? And then the photograph he had studied. It frightened him now to recall the image—some covert meaning stirred within it, struggling to be seen. Dr. Winters picked the probe up from the table and turned again to the corpse. As surely and exactly as if he had already ascertained the wound's presence, he leaned forward and touched it: a small, neat puncture, just beneath the xiphoid process. He introduced the probe. The wound received it deeply, in a familiar direction.

The doctor went to the desk, and took up the photograph again. Pollock's and Jackson's wounded areas were not in contact. The third man's head was sandwiched between their bodies at just that point. He searched out another picture, in which this third man was more central, and found his name inked in below his image: Joe Allen.

Dreamingly, Dr. Winters went to the wide metal door, shoved it aside, entered the vault. He did not search, but went straight to the trestle where his friend had paused some hours

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before, and found the same name on its tag.

The body, beneath decay's spurious obesity, was trim and well-muscled. The face was square-cut, shelf-browed, with a vulpine nose skewed by an old fracture. The swollen tongue lay behind the teeth, and the bulge of decomposition did not obscure what the man's initial impact must have been—handsome and open, his now-waxen black eyes sly and convivial. Say, good buddy, got a minute? I see you comin' on the swing shift every day, don't I? Yeah, Joe Allen. Look, I know it's late, you want to get home, tell the wife you ain't been in there drinkin' since you got off, right? Oh, yeah, I hear that. But this damn disappearance thing's got me so edgy, and I'd swear to God just as I was coming here I seen someone moving around back of that frame house up the street. See how the trees thin out a little down back of the yard, where the moonlight gets in? That's right. Well, I got me this little popper here. Oh, yeah, that's a beauty, we'll have it covered between us. I knew I could spot a man ready for some trouble—couldn't find a patrol car anywhere on the street. Yeah, just down in here now, to that clump of pine. Step careful, you can barely see. That's right....

The doctor's face ran with sweat. He turned on his heel and walked out of the vault, heaving the door shut behind him. In the office's greater warmth he felt the perspiration soaking his shirt under the smock. His stomach rasped with steady oscillations of pain, but he scarcely attended it. He went to Pollock and seized up the post-mortem knife.

The work was done with surreal speed, the laminae of flesh and bone recoiling smoothly beneath his desperate but unerring hands, until the thoracic cavity lay exposed, and in it, the vampire-stricken lungs, two gnarled lumps of grey tissue.

He searched no deeper, knowing what the heart and veins would show. He returned to sit at the desk, weakly drooping, the knife, forgotten, still in his left hand. He looked at the window, and it seemed his thoughts originated with that fainter, more tenuous Dr. Winters hanging like a ghost outside.

What was this world he lived in? Surely, in a lifetime, he had not begun to guess. To feed in such a way! There was horror enough in this alone. But to feed thus *in his own grave*. How had he accomplished it—leaving aside how he had fought suffocation long enough to do anything at all? How was it to be comprehended, a greed that raged so hotly it would glut itself at the very threshold of its own destruction? That last feast was surely in his stomach still.

Dr. Winters looked at the photograph, at Allen's head snugged into the others' middles like a hungry suckling nuzzling to the sow. Then he looked at

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the knife in his hand. The hand felt empty of all technique. Its one impulse was to slash, cleave, obliterate the remains of this gluttonous thing, this Joe Allen. He must do this, or flee it utterly. There was no course between. He did not move.

"I *will* examine him," said the ghost in the glass, and did not move. Inside the refrigeration vault, there was a slight noise.

No. It had been some hitch in the generator's murmur. Nothing in there could move. There was another noise, a brief friction against the vault's inner wall. The two old men shook their heads at one another. A catch clicked and the metal door slid open. Behind the staring image of his own amazement, the doctor saw that a filthy shape stood in the doorway and raised its arms towards him in a gesture of supplication. The doctor turned in his chair. From the shape came a whistling groan, the decayed fragment of a human voice.

Pleadingly, Joe Allen worked his jaw and spread his purple hands. As if speech were a maggot struggling to emerge from his mouth, the blue, tumescent face toiled, the huge tongue wallowed helplessly between the viscid lips.

The doctor reached for the telephone, lifted the receiver. Its deadness to his ear meant nothing—he could not have spoken. The thing confronting him, with each least movement that it made, destroyed the very frame of sanity in which words might have meaning, reduced the world itself around him to a waste of dark and silence, a starlit ruin where already, everywhere, the alien and unimaginable was awakening to its new dominion. The corpse raised and reached out one hand as if to stay him—turned, and walked towards the instrument table. Its legs were leaden, it rocked its shoulders like a swimmer, fighting to make its passage through gravity's dense medium. It reached the table and grasped it exhaustedly. The doctor found himself on his feet, crouched slightly, weightlessly still. The knife in his hand was the only part of himself he clearly felt, and it was like a tongue of fire, a crematory flame. Joe Allen's corpse thrust one hand among the instruments. The thick fingers, with a queer, simian ineptitude, brought up a scalpel. Both hands clasped the little handle and plunged the blade between the lips, as a thirsty child might a popsicle, then jerked it out again, slashing the tongue. Turbid fluid splashed down to the floor. The jaw worked stiffly, the mouth brought out words in a wet, ragged hiss:

"Please. Help me. Trapped in *this.*" One dead hand struck the dead chest. "Starving."

"What are you?"

"Traveler. Not of earth."

"An eater of human flesh. A drinker of human blood."

"No. No. Hiding only. Am small. Shape hideous to you. Feared death."

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"You brought death." The doctor spoke with the calm of perfect disbelief, himself as incredible to him as the thing he spoke with. It shook its head, the dull, popped eyes glaring with an agony of thwarted expression.

"Killed none. Hid in this. Hid in this not to be killed. Five days now. Drowning in decay. Free me. Please."

"No. You have come to feed on us, you are not hiding in fear. We are your food, your meat and drink. You fed on those two men within your grave. *Their* grave. For you, a delay. In fact, a diversion that has ended the hunt for you."

"No! No! Used men already dead. For me, five days, starvation. Even less. Fed only from necessity. Horrible necessity!"

The spoiled vocal instrument made a mangled gasp of the last word—an inhuman, snakepit noise the doctor felt as a cold flicker of ophidian tongues within his ears—while the dead arms moved in a sodden approximation of the body language that swears truth.

"No," the doctor said. "You killed them all. Including your...tool—this man. *What are you?*" Panic erupted in the question which he tried to bury by answering himself instantly. "Resolute, yes. That surely. You used death for an escape route. You need no oxygen perhaps."

"Extracted more than my need from gasses of decay. A lesser component of our metabolism."

The voice was gaining distinctness, developing makeshifts for tones lost in the agonal rupturing of the valves and stops of speech, more effectively wrestling vowel and consonant from the putrid tongue and lips. At the same time the body's crudity of movement did not quite obscure a subtle, incessant experimentation. Fingers flexed and stirred, testing the give of tendons, groping the palm for the old points of purchase and counter-pressure there. The knees, with cautious repetitions, assessed the new limits of their articulation.

"What was the sphere?"

"My ship. Its destruction our first duty facing discovery." (Fear touched the doctor, like a slug climbing his neck; he had seen, as it spoke, a sharp, spastic activity of the tongue, a pleating and shrinkage of its bulk as at the tug of some inward adjustment.) "No chance to re-enter. Leaving this take far too long. Not even time to set for destruct—must extrude a cilium, chemical key to broach hull shield. In shaft my only chance to halt host."

The right arm tested the wrist, and the scalpel the hand still held cut white sparks from the air, while the word "host" seemed itself a little knife-prick, a teasing abandonment of fiction—though the dead mask showed no irony—preliminary to attack.

But he found that fear had gone from him. The impossibility with which he conversed, and was about to struggle, was working in him an overwhelming amplification of his life's

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long helpless rage at death. He found his parochial pity for earth alone stretched to the trans-stellar scope this traveler commanded, to the whole cosmic trashyard with its bulldozed multitudes of corpses; galactic wheels of carnage—stars, planets with their most majestic generations—all trash, cracked bones and foul rags that pooled, settled, reconcatenated in futile symmetries gravid with new multitudes of briefly animate trash.

And this, standing before him now, was the death it was given him particularly to deal—his mite was being called in by the universal Treasury of death, and Dr. Winters found himself, an old healer, on fire to pay. His own, more lethal blade, tugged at his hand with its own sharp appetite. He felt entirely the Examiner once more, knew the precise cuts he would make, swiftly and without error. *Very soon now*, he thought and coolly probed for some further insight before its onslaught:

"Why must your ship be destroyed, even at the cost of your host's life?"

"We must not be understood."

"The livestock must not understand what is devouring them."

"Yes, doctor. Not all at once. But one by one. You will understand what is devouring you. That is essential to my feast."

The doctor shook his head. "You are in your grave already, Traveler. That body will be your coffin. You will be buried in it a second time, for all time."

The thing came one step nearer and opened its mouth. The flabby throat wrestled as with speech, but what sprang out was a slender white filament, more than whip-fast. Dr. Winters saw only the first flicker of its eruption, and then his brain nova-ed, thinning out at light-speed to a white nullity.

When the doctor came to himself, it was in fact to a part of himself only. Before he had opened his eyes he found that his wakened mind had repossessed proprioceptively only a bizarre truncation of his body. His head, neck, left shoulder, arm and hand declared themselves—the rest was silence.

When he opened his eyes, he found that he lay supine on the gurney, and naked. Something propped his head. A strap bound his left elbow to the gurney's edge, a strap he could feel. His chest was also anchored by a strap, and this he could not feel. Indeed, save for its active remnant, his entire body might have been bound in a block of ice, so numb was it, and so powerless was he to compel the slightest movement from the least part of it.

The room was empty, but from the open door of the vault there came slight sounds: the creak and soft frictions of heavy tarpaulin shifted to accommodate some business involving small clicking and kissing noises.

Tears of fury filled the doctor's eyes. Clenching his one fist at the

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starry engine of creation that he could not see, he ground his teeth and whispered in the hot breath of strangled weeping:

"Take it back, this dirty little shred of life! I throw it off gladly like the filth it is." The slow knock of bootsoles loudened from within the vault, and he turned his head. From the vault door Joe Allen's corpse approached him.

It moved with new energy, though its gait was grotesque, a ducking, hitching progress, jerky with circumventions of decayed muscle, while above this galvanized, struggling frame, the bruise-colored face hung inanimate, an image of detachment. With terrible clarity it revealed the thing for what it was—a damaged hand-puppet vigorously worked from within. And when that frozen face was brought to hang above the doctor, the reeking hands, with the light, solicitous touch of friends at sickbeds, rested on his naked thigh.

The absence of sensation made the touch more dreadful than if felt. It showed him that the nightmare he still desperately denied at heart had annexed his body while he—holding head and arm free—had already more than half-drowned in its mortal paralysis. There lay his nightmare part, a nothingness freely possessed by an unspeakability. The corpse said:

"Rotten blood. Thin nourishment. Only one hour alone before you came. Fed from neighbor to my left—barely had strength to extend siphon. Fed from the right while you worked. Tricky going—you are alert. Expected Dr. Parsons. Energy needs of animating this"—one hand left the doctor's thigh and smote the dusty overalls—"and of host-transfer, very high. Once I have you synapsed, will be near starvation again."

A sequence of unbearable images unfolded in the doctor's mind, even as the robot carrion turned from the gurney and walked to the instrument table: the sheriff's arrival just after dawn, alone of course, since Craven always took thought for his deputies' rest and because on this errand he would want privacy to consider any indiscretion on behalf of the miners' survivors that the situation might call for; his finding his old friend, supine and alarmingly weak; his hurrying over, his leaning near. Then, somewhat later, a police car containing a rack of still wet bones might plunge off the highway above some deep spot in the gorge.

The corpse took an evidence box from the table and put the scalpel in it. Then it turned and retrieved the mortuary knife from the floor and put that in as well, saying as it did so, without turning, "The sheriff will come in the morning. You spoke like close friends. He will probably come alone."

The coincidence with his thoughts had to be accident, but the intent to terrify and appall him was clear. The tone and timing of that patched-up voice were unmistakably deliberate

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—sly probes that sought his anguish specifically, sought his mind's personal center. He watched the corpse—back at the table—dipping an apish but accurate hand and plucking up rib shears, scissors, clamps, adding all to the box. He stared, momentarilly emptied by shock of all but the will to know finally the full extent of the horror that had appropriated his life. Joe Allen's body carried the box to the worktable beside the gurney, and the expressionless eyes met the doctor's.

"I have gambled. A grave gamble. But now I have won. At risk of personal discovery we are obliged to disconnect, contract, hide as well as possible in host body. Suicide in effect. I disregarded situational imperatives, despite starvation before disinterment and subsequent autopsy all but certain. I caught up with crew, tackled Pollock and Jackson microseconds before blast. Computed five days' survival from this cache, could disconnect at limit of strength to do so, but otherwise would chance autopsy, knowing doctor was alcoholic incompetent. And now see my gain. You are a prize host, can feed with near impunity even when killing too dangerous. Safe meals delivered to you still warm."

The corpse had painstakingly aligned the gurney parallel to the worktable but offset, the table's foot extending past the gurney's, and separated from it by a distance somewhat less than the reach of Joe Allen's right arm. Now the dead hands distributed the implements along the right edge of the table, save for the scissors and the box. These the corpse took to the table's foot, where it set down the box and slid the scissors' jaws round one strap of its overalls. It began to speak again, and as it did, the scissors dismembered its cerements in unhesitating strokes.

"The cut must be medical, forensically right, though a smaller one easier. Must be careful of the pectoral muscles or arms will not convey me. I am no larva anymore—over fifteen hundred grams."

To ease the nightmare's suffocating pressure, to thrust out some flicker of his own will against its engulfment, the doctor flung a question, his voice more cracked than the other's now was:

"Why is my arm free?"

"The last, fine neural splicing needs a sensory-motor standard, to perfect my brain's fit to yours. Lacking this eye-hand coordinating check, much coarser motor control of host. This done, I flush out the paralytic, unbind us, and we are free together."

The grave-clothes had fallen in a puzzle of fragments, and the cadaver stood naked, its dark, gas-rounded contours making it seem some sleek marine creature, ruddered with the black-veined, gas-distended sex. Again the voice had teased for his fear, had uttered the last word with a savoring protraction, and now the doctor's cup of anguish brimmed over; horror and outrage wrenched his spirit in brutal alternation as if trying to tear it naked

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from its captive frame. He rolled his head in this deadlock, his mouth beginning to split with the slow birth of a mind-emptying outcry.

The corpse watched this, giving a single nod that might have been approbation. Then it mounted the worktable and, with the concentrated caution of some practiced convalescent reentering his bed, lay on its back. The dead eyes again sought the living and found the doctor staring back, grinning insanely.

"Clever corpse!" the doctor cried. "Clever, carnivorous corpse! Able alien! Please don't think I'm criticizing. Who am I to criticize? A mere arm and shoulder, a talking hand, just a small piece of a pathologist. But I'm confused." He paused, savoring the monster's attentive silence and his own buoyancy in the hysterical levity that had unexpectedly liberated him. "You're going to use your puppet there to pluck you out of itself and put you on me. But once he's pulled you from your driver's seat, won't he go dead, so to speak, and drop you? You could get a nasty knock. Why not set a plank between the tables—the puppet opens the door, and you scuttle, ooze, lurch, flop, slither, as the case may be, across the bridge. No messy spills. And in any case, isn't this an odd, rather clumsy way to get around among your cattle? Shouldn't you at least carry your own scalpels when you travel? There's always the risk you'll run across that one host in a million that isn't carrying one with him."

He knew his gibes would be answered to his own despair. He exulted, but solely in the momentary bafflement of the predator—in having, for just a moment, mocked its gloating assurance to silence and marred its feast.

Its right hand picked up the postmortem knife beside it, and the left wedged a roll of gauze beneath Allen's neck, lifting the throat to a more prominent arch. The mouth told the ceiling:

"We retain larval form till entry of the host. As larvae we have locomotor structures, and sense-buds usable outside our ships' sensory amplifiers. I waited coiled round Joe Allen's bed leg till night, entered by his mouth as he slept." Allen's hand lifted the knife, held it high above the dull, quick eyes, turning it in the light. "Once lodged, we have three instars to adult form," the voice continued absently—the knife might have been a mirror from which the corpse read its features. "Larvally we have only a sketch of our full neural tap. Our metamorphosis cued and determined by host's endosomatic ecology. I matured in three days." Allen's wrist flexed, tipping the knife's point downmost. "Most supreme adaptations purchased at the cost of inessential capacities." The elbow pronated and slowly flexed, hooking the knife body-wards. "Our hosts are all sentients, eco-dominants, are already carrying the baggage of coping structures for the planetary en-

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vironment. Limbs, sensory portals"—the fist planted the fang of its tool under the chin, tilted it and rode it smoothly down the throat, the voice proceeding unmarred from under the furrow that the steel ploughed—"so—matic envelopes, instrumentalities"—down the sternum, diaphragm, abdomen the stainless blade painted its stripe of gaping, muddy tissue—" with a hosts' brain we inherit all these, the mastery of any planet, netted in its dominant's cerebral nexus. Thus our genetic codings are now all but disencumbered of such provisions."

So swiftly the doctor flinched, Joe Allen's hand slashed four lateral cuts from the great wound's axis. The seeming butchery left two flawlessly drawn thoracic flaps cleanly outlined. The left hand raised the left flap's hem, and the right coaxed the knife into the aperture, deepening it with small stabs and slices. The posture was a man's who searches a breast pocket, with the dead eyes studying the slow recoil of flesh. The voice, when it resumed, had geared up to an intenser pitch:

"Galactically, the chordate nerve/brain paradigm abounds, and the neural labyrinth is our dominion. Are we to make plank bridges and worm across them to our food? Are cockroaches greater than we for having legs to run up walls and antennae to grope their way! All the quaint, hinged crutches that life sports! The stilts, fins, fans, springs, stalks, flippers and feathers, all in turn so variously terminating in hooks, clamps, suckers, scissors, forks or little cages of digits! And besides all the gadgets it concocts for wrestling through its worlds, it is all knobbed, whiskered, crested, plumed, vented, spiked or measeled over with perceptual gear for combing pittances of noise or color from the enviroring plentitude."

Invincibly calm and sure, the hands traded tool and tasks. The right flap eased back, revealing ropes of ingeniously spared muscle while promising a genuine appearance once sutured back in place. Helplessly the doctor felt his delirious defiance bleed away and a bleak fascination rebind him.

"We are the taps and relays that share the host's aggregate of afferent nerve-impulse precisely at its nodes of integration. We are the brains that peruse these integrations, integrate them with our existing banks of host-specific data, and, lastly, let their consequences flow down the motor pathway—either the consequences they seek spontaneously, or those we wish to graft upon them. We are besides a streamlined alimentary/circulatory system and a reproductive apparatus. And more than this we need not be."

The corpse had spread its bloody vest, and the feculent hands now took up the rib shears. The voice's sinister coloration of pitch and stress grew yet more marked—the phrases slid from the tongue with a cobra's seeking sway, winding their liquid rhythms

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round the doctor till a gap in his resistance should let them pour through to slaughter the little courage left him.

"For in this form we have inhabited the densest brainweb of three hundred races, lain intricately snug within them like thriving vine on trelliswork. We've looked out from too many variously windowed masks to regret our own vestigial senses. None read their worlds definitely. Far better then our nomad's range and choice than an unvarying tenancy of one poor set of structures. Far better to slip on as we do whole living beings and wear at once all of their limbs and organs, memories and powers—wear all as tightly congruent to our wills as a glove is to the hand that fills it."

The shears clipped through the gristle, stolid, bloody jaws monotonously feeding, stopping short of the sterno-clavicular joint in the manubrium where the muscles of the pectoral girdle have an important anchorage.

"No consciousness of the chordate type that we have found has been impermeable to our finesse—no dendritic pattern so elaborate we could not read its stitchwork and thread ourselves to match, precisely map its each synaptic seam till we could loosen it and retailor all to suit ourselves. We have strutted costumed in the bodies of planetary autarchs, venerable manikins of moral fashion, but cut of the universal cloth: the weave of fleet electric filaments of experience which we easily re-shuttled to the warp of our wishes. Whereafter—newly hemmed and gathered—their living fabric hung obedient to our bias, investing us with honor and influence unlimited."

The tricky verbal melody, through the corpse's deft, unfaltering self-dismemberment—the sheer neuromuscular orchestration of the compound activity—struck Dr. Winters with the detached enthrallment great keyboard performers could bring him. He glimpsed the alien's perspective—a Gulliver waiting in a brobdingnagian grave, then marshalling a dead giant against a living, like a dwarf in a huge mechanical crane, feverishly programming combat on a battery of levers and pedals, waiting for the robot arms' enactments, the remote, titanic impact of the foes—and he marveled, filled with a bleak wonder at life's infinite strategy and plasticity. Joe Allen's hands reached into his half-opened abdominal cavity, reached deep below the uncut anterior muscle that was exposed by the shallow, spurious incision of the epidermis, till by external measure they were extended far enough to be touching his thighs. The voice was still as the forearms advertised a delicate rummaging with the buried fingers. The shoulders drew back. As the steady withdrawal brought the wrists into view, the dead legs tremored and quaked with diffuse spasms.

"You called your kind our food and drink, doctor. If you were merely that,

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an elementary usurpation of your motor tracts alone would satisfy us, give us perfect cattle-control—for what rarest word or subtlest behavior is more than a flurry of varied muscles? That trifling skill was ours long ago. It is not mere blood that feeds this lust I feel now to tenant you, this craving for an intimacy that years will not stale. My truest feast lies in compelling you to feed in that way and in the utter deformation of your will this will involve. Had gross nourishment been my prime need, then my gravemates—Pollock and Jackson—could have eked out two weeks of life for me or more. But I scorned a cowardly parsimony in the face of death. I reinvested more than half the energy that their blood gave me in fabricating chemicals to keep their brains alive, and fluid-bathed with oxygenated nutriment."

Out of the chasmed midriff the smeared hands dragged two long tresses of silvery filament that writhed and sparkled with a million simultaneous coilings and contractions. The legs jittered with faint, chaotic pulses throughout their musculature, until the bright, vermiculate tresses had gathered into two spheric masses which the hands laid carefully within the incision. Then the legs lay still as death.

"I had accessory neural taps only to spare, but I could access much memory, and all of their cognitive responses, and having in my banks all the organ of Coti's electrochemical conversions of English words, I could whisper anything to them directly into the eighth cranial nerve. Those are our true feast, doctor, such bodiless electric storms of impotent cognition as I tickled up in those two little bone globes. I was forced to drain them yesterday, just before disinterment. They lived till then and understood everything—*everything* I did to them."

When the voice paused, the dead and living eyes were locked together. They remained so a moment, and then the dead face smiled.

It recapitulated all the horror of Allen's first resurrection—this waking of expressive soul from those grave-mound contours. And it was a demon-soul the doctor saw awaken: the smile was barbed with fine, sharp hooks of cruelty at the corners of the mouth, while the barbed eyes beamed fond, langorous anticipation of his pain. Remotely, Dr. Winters heard the flat sound of his own voice asking:

"And Joe Allen?"

"Oh, yes, doctor. He is with us now, has been throughout. I grieve to abandon so rare a host! He is a true hermit-philosopher, well-read in four languages. He is writing a translation of Marcus Aurelius—he was, I mean, in his free time...."

Long minutes succeeded of the voice accompanying the surreal self-autopsy, but the doctor lay stilled, emptied of reactive power. Still, the full understanding of his fate

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reverberated in his mind—an empty room though which the voice, not heard exactly but somehow implanted directly as in the subterranean torture it had just described, sent aftershocks of realization, amplifications of the Unspeakable.

The parasite had traced and tapped the complex interface between cortical integration of input and the consequent neural output shaping response. It had interposed its brain between, sharing consciousness while solely commanding the pathways of reaction. The host, the bottled personality, was mute and limbless for any least expression of its own will, while hellishly articulate and agile in the service of the parasite's. It was the host's own hands that bound and wrenched the life half out of his prey, his own loins that experienced the repeated orgasms crowning his other despoliations of their bodies. And when they lay, bound and shrieking still, ready for the consummation, it was his own strength that hauled the smoking entrails from them, and his own intimate tongue and guzzling mouth he plunged into the rank, palpitating feast.

And the doctor had glimpses of the history behind this predation, that of a race so far advanced in the essentializing, the inexorable abstraction of their own mental fabric that through scientific commitment and genetic self-cultivation they had come to embody their own model of perfected consciousness, streamlined to permit the entry of other beings and the direct acquisition of their experiential worlds. All strictest scholarship at first, until there matured in the disembodied scholars their long-germinal and now blazing, jealous hatred for all 'lesser' minds rooted and clothed in the soil and sunlight of solid, particular worlds. The parasite spoke of the "cerebral music" the "symphonies of agonized paradox" that were its invasion's chief plunder. The doctor felt the truth behind this grandiloquence: its actual harvest from the systematic violation of encoffined personalities was the experience of a barren supremacy of means over lives more primitive, perhaps, but vastly wealthier in the vividness and passionate concern with which life for them was imbued.

Joe Allen's hands had scooped up the bunched skeins of alien nerve, with the wrinkled brain-node couched amidst them, and for some time had waited the slow retraction of a last major trunkline which seemingly had followed the spine's axis. At last, when only a slender subfiber of this remained implanted, the corpse, smiling once more, held up for him to view its reconcatenated master. The doctor looked into its eyes then and spoke—not to their controller, but to the captive who shared them with it, and who now, the doctor knew, neared his final death.

"Goodbye, Joe Allen. Eddie Sykes. You are guiltless. Peace be with you at last."

The demon smile remained fixed,

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the right hand reached its viscid cargo across the gap and over the doctor's groin. He watched the hand set the glittering medusa's head—his new self—upon his flesh, return to the table, take up the scalpel, and reach back to cut in his groin a four-inch incision—all in eerie absence of tactile stimulus. The line that had remained plunged into the corpse suddenly whipped free of the mediastinal crevice, retracted across the gap and shortened to a taut stub on the seething organism atop the doctor.

Joe Allen's body collapsed, emptied, all slack. He was a corpse again entirely, but with one anomalous feature to his posture. His right arm had not dropped to the nearly vertical hang that would have been natural. At the instant of the alien's unplugging, the shoulder had given a fierce shrug and wrenching of its angle, flinging the arm upward as it died so that it now lay in the orientation of an arm that reaches up for a ladder's next rung. The slightest tremor would unfix the joints and dump the arm back into the gravitational bias; it would also serve to dump the scalpel from the proferred, upturned palm that implement still precariously occupied.

The man had repossessed himself one microsecond before his end. The doctor's heart stirred, woke, and sang within him, for he saw that the scalpel was just in reach of his fingers at his forearm's fullest stretch from the bound elbow. The horror crouched on him and, even now slowly feeding its trunkline into his groin incision, at first stopped the doctor's hand with a pang of terror. Then he reminded himself that, until implanted, the enemy was a senseless mass, bristling with plugs, with input jacks for senses, but, until installed in the physical amplifiers of eyes and ears, an utterly deaf, blind monad that waited in a perfect solipsism between two captive sensory envelopes.

He saw his straining fingers above the bright tool of freedom, thought with an insane smile of God and Adam on the Cistine ceiling, and then, with a lifespan of surgeon's fine control, plucked up the scalpel. The arm fell and hung.

"Sleep." The doctor said. "Sleep revenged."

But he found his retaliation harshly reined-in by the alien's careful provisions. His elbow had been fixed with his upper arm almost at right angles to his body's long axis; his forearm could reach his hand inward and present it closely to the face, suiting the parasite's need of an eye-hand coordinative check, but could not, even with the scalpel's added reach, bring its point within four inches of his groin. Steadily the parasite fed in its tapline. It would usurp motor control in three or four minutes at most, to judge by the time its extrication from Allen had taken.

Frantically the doctor bent his wrist inwards to its limit, trying to pick

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through the strap where it crossed his inner elbow. Sufficient pressure was impossible, and the hold so awkward that even feeble attempts threatened the loss of the scalpel. Smoothly the root of alien control sank into him. It was a defenseless thing of jelly against which he lay lethally armed, and he was still doomed—a preview of all his thrall's impotence-to-be.

But of course there was a way. Not to survive. But to escape, and to have vengeance. For a moment he stared at his captor, hardening his mettle in the blaze of hate it lit in him. Then, swiftly, he determined the order of his moves, and began.

He reached the scalpel to his neck and opened his superior thyroid vein—his inkwell. He laid the scalpel by his ear, dipped his finger in his blood, and began to write on the metal surface of the gurney, beginning by his thigh and moving towards his armpit. Oddly, the incision of his neck, though this was muscularly awake, had been painless, which gave him hopes that raised his courage for what remained to do.

When he had done the message read:

MIND PARASITE
FM ALLEN IN ME
CUT *ALL* TILL FIND
1500 GM MASS
NERVE FIBRE

* * *

He wanted to write goodbye to his friend, but the alien had begun to pay out smaller, auxiliary filaments collaterally with the main one, and all now lay in speed.

He took up the scalpel, rolled his head to the left, and plunged the blade deep in his ear.

Miracle! Last, accidental mercy! It was painless. Some procedural, highly specific anesthetic was in effect. With careful plunges, he obliterated the right inner ear and then thrust silence, with equal thoroughness, into the left. The slashing of the vocal chords followed, then the tendons in the back of the neck that hold it erect. He wished he were free to unstring knees and elbows too, but it could not be. But blinded, with centers of balance lost, with only rough motor control—all these conditions should fetter the alien's escape, should it in the first place manage the reanimation of a bloodless corpse in which it had not yet achieved a fine-tuned interweave. Before he extinguished his eyes, he paused, the scalpel poised above his face, and blinked them to clear his aim of tears. The right, then the left, both retinas meticulously carved away, the yolk of vision quite scooped out of them. The scalpel's last task, once it had tilted the head sideways to guide the bloodflow absolutely clear of possible effacement of the message, was to slash the external carotid artery.

When this was done the old man

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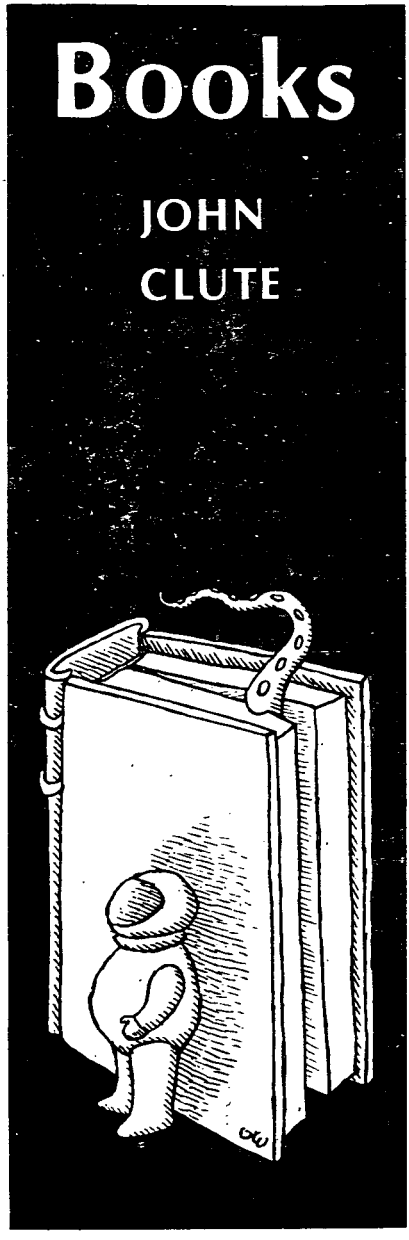
Books

JOHN CLUTE



Kit Reed, *Magic Time*, Putnam's, $10.95

Victoria Schochet and John Silbersack, editors, *The Berkley Showcase, Volume 1; New Writings in Science Fiction and Fantasy*, Berkley, $1.95

Lee Killough, *The Monitor, The Miners and the Shree*, Ballantine/Del Rey, $1.95

Gregory Benford and William Rotsler, *Shiva Descending*, Avon Books, $2.50

Barry N. Malzberg, *The Man Who Loved the Midnight Lady*, Doubleday & Company, $10.00

Let us speak briefly of the classic American cinema. Let us make the point that you can always recognize a Hollywood film because it means so much. This point will soon lead us to Walt Disney, and to Kit Reed's new novel, *Magic Time*, which attempts to dramatize the fascist mentality with a kind of light appalling brio, and which does not mention Walt Disney. But first. Because of the studio system which thrived in Hollywood until Lucille Ball got pregnant, it was possible for those in charge of making films to rigorously predetermine almost every detail of every scene that went before the camera to be translated into dream-language, so that not a word, not a prop, not a single tit, not an angle of lighting, could be anything but *meant*. If the camera focused on a vase, on that vase would turn the plot, because there was no vase for vase's sake in the Hollywood film, no vase that uncovered the face of God in an

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instant of ungovernable epiphany, *no mere vase*. The vase that remained was all meaning, use, story. What we saw on the screen (and in these latter days, choked with nostalgia, watch again on television) was an intensely sanitized, chaste, debugged tourists' paradise, where it was impossible to get lost, where menu (to talk philosophical for a moment) preceded existence.

This being true of the Hollywood product, then the Holywood filmmakers themselves, at least in their dreams, must have been veritable gods of their little worlds, in which the Tablets of the Law actually worked, and from which chaos was banished. The main difficulty, of course, must always have been people. Actors. The anarchic complexity of the human face must often have deranged the most rigidly prescribed Tablet or menu, and it's surely not accidental that the archetypal Hollywood mind (though perhaps not personality) was Walt Disney, the man who created, as an industrially-viable alternative to the subversive human actor, the feature length cartoon. Nor can it be entirely accidental that Disney, having created a closed universe of meaning for Snow White, went on to conceive of Disneyland, which is a closed universe of meaning for the rest of us, at least in theory. If the world were like Disneyland, who could doubt the existence of God?

This is surely not an original point. It is not a radical new analysis of the human condition as imprisoned by Hollywood genre engineers (it might be noted that science fiction, speaking of genres, boasts a few engineers of its own) and by Walt Disney in particular. Disneyland itself has become an honored part of the American nightmare of self-analysis, an immediately recognizable emblem of a savage future in which we discovered ourselves to be cartoon consumers locked into a sanitary totalitarian plastic tape-loop, our every move monitored, our every impulse predetermined by the invisible spider god. The picture is familiar. From within the field of science fiction, writers like Frederik Pohl have been touching on the vision for decades now. Post-Hollywood movies like *Westworld* or *The Stepford Wives* have vulgarized some of the more obvious implications of treating robots and humans as nightmarishly interchangeable. The significant fact about Disneyland is that, like a film of itself, it embodies the *meaning* of all these echoes and prefigurations with a compelling hypnotic clarity that burns through the fabric of most fictional attempts at satirizing it. (We're addressing here a difficulty that confronts all satirists of the extremes of American life—so movie-like in its self-consciousness—hence the length of this prologue.) The idea of Disneyland is too exhaustively present in the fact of Disneyland for most satire to be anything more than a kind of after-the-fact

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nagging. Whatever you say, Walt already meant it.

So it takes a brave and formidable writer to tackle his vision successfully, this meaning system too hot and dense for casual use, even if you don't name it, as Kit Reed very carefully doesn't in *Magic Time*, which is set in a near future America strikingly like the America of today, except for holofilms, a few stray gimmicks, and the presence of Happy Habitat, "a unique blend of Disneyland and Fantasy Island," as the jacket copy puts it, blowing her cover right off and arousing dangerously high expectations in the reader, though there are some signs that Ms Reed is fully aware of the nature of the task she has set out for herself. For instance, she has presented the first-person narratives of her four protagonists as a kind of tape transcription, a script perhaps for a holofilm of the mind mirroring the filmic origins of the world she is attempting to describe, which does point in the direction of a confrontation with her material. Bits of narrative her protagonists cannot tell themselves are even labelled "outtakes," as though the reader had VIP privileges in the cutting room, and their adventures in trying to escape from Happy Habitat are constantly tracked by cameras, harangued by voiceovers, hyped by trailers which they themselves can watch on the omnipresent television screens. All well and good, you'd think; Ms Reed is showing commendable task consciousness. But unfortunately, from beginning to end, the actual tone of the telling of *Magic Time*, in whoever's voice, is so amiable as to seem pixillated, and nothing could be more fatal than whimsy in a book the very mention of whose subject matter—as I've been arguing—burns right through mere fictional wordplay. So *Magic Time* ends up being something rather unusual, a likeable book that gets the back up, because there's something unnatural—something monstrous—in a tale so virginal in its telling, so prepubescent in its clean clear tone, and so ominously pregnant with meaning.

The story is swift, nor do the four protagonists much complicate matters with their varying points of view. Tame holofilm maker Boone Castle finds himself trapped in Happy Habitat as a live exhibit in a continuing drama starring live kidnapped people. Elderly Eveline is trapped in the Golden Acres section of the park, a senior citizen's village where she is encouraged in her intense cosmetic battle against aging, but solely so that she can be used as an unwitting bit player in one of the front stage melodramas until she bites the dust. Kaa Naaji, Indian inventor of a method of extracting energy from cow dung, has come to Happy Habitat voluntarily, wishing to recover a sense of springtide adventure, but soon falls in love with big, tough violent Luce, a woman guard disgusted by him and infatuated with Boone Castle. In one way or another, the four gradually dis-

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cover what the reader—being versed in the meaning of Disneyland—has known from the first: that Happy Habitat is a totalitarian control fantasy; that staff, customers and prisoners are all victims to be interchangeably manipulated, like robots. After ganging up together, the four star escapers—for the management treats their battle to get out as another part of the ongoing show—finally penetrate to the inner sanctum, a Disney-like cottage in a fake meadow, where they confront Pa, the owner of Happy Habitat. Unsurprisingly, given some of the sick jokes still floating about to the effect that Walt Disney was frozen after his death in 1966 and will one day rise to save us all like King Arthur, Pa turns out to be a wired-up brain in a box, having defeated death in this fashion. At some length, Pa expounds upon his philosophy:

> "Then you have seen how harmonious I have made everything. Rather than re-create nature here, I have chosen to improve on it—the gardens, the functional objects, the avenues were all conceived to be more beautiful than anything in nature, more disciplined, and that is all part of the plan."

And so forth. The plan is simple: Pa intends to sanitize the rest of America by force. He is of course thwarted, but only—we are intended to understand—after a fashion, because when Boone Castle gets out of the park at long last, he finds that he has by no means defeated the Happy Habitat system of meaning, for he has become a star. Perhaps *Magic Time* is supposed to be the book of the movie.

Witty; but wit is not enough. There is no way grace-notes can contain the pregnancy of the dream of America Ms Reed has elected to score for virginal. The monster is not laid, merely tickled a little.

A few more minor books here, though one of them is very thick. Victoria Schochet and John Silbersack of Berkley Publishing Corporation have put together in *The Berkley Showcase Volume 1; New Writings in Science Fiction and Fantasy* what they have managed to describe as "a nonprofit-oriented house anthology," by which they presumably intend to say that making a profit was not their prime objective, though what they *do* say is that *not* making a profit was their prime objective, which is not the same thing at all. One hopes they're still employed. The anthology itself is a very mixed bag. "The Princess and the Bear" by Orson Scott Card, though wrapped in cellophane, is still a very neat and rather moving fable about the nature of sexual love, among other things. "Sergeant Pepper" by Karl Hansen, though I wouldn't much care to unpack its moral implications a decade after Viet Nam, mixes medicine and warfare at a high kinetic pitch. "Billy Big-Eyes" by Howard Waldrop, with far more detail than content,

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deals rather weepily with tragic love in a universe where Space Scouts have eyes surgically modified better to read the stars with; perhaps a series is in the offing. The rest—unfortunately including a routine exercise in feminism from Elizabeth A. Lynn, and a totally opaque tale by Janet E. Morris about (I think) alchemy at the time of Paracelsus (maybe)—might be from some creative writing workshop, I mean the stories that *didn't* get read.

Lee Killough has written a couple of decent novels, and some good short stories, a few of the latter being published in this magazine. Because there is nothing precisely offensive about *The Monitor, The Miners and the Shree*, perhaps it should be passed over in silence, after a minute or two. The Shree are an avian species. The miners have been mining there illegally for hundreds of years. The stiff-necked Monitor and her chums make an official visit to the Shree planet but before they find out anything of interest are cast into the wilderness (by the miners) and rescued (by the Shree). For 150 pages, the Monitor gradually cottons on to the benefits which the miners have bestowed upon the proud, twittering Shree. At the end of the book, she defends the miners at the galactic trial. Almost all of the text is padding, and the story was probably originally conceived of as a juvenile. There are few threatening words, and not an original one. What can you say?

Now for the thick one. *Shiva Descending*, by Gregory Benford (who should know better but has maybe been hoodwinked by the Protestant work ethic) and William Rotsler (who *did* write *Zandra)*, is probably not the worst novel about a huge meteor on a collision course with our planet, but then who's keeping score. Will Shiva total Terra? Will the President go bonkers from too much strain and too much sex with his secretary? Will the nutcase astronaut also go finally around the bend? These questions, and many many more, receive answers. It all takes 400 pages as NASA gets into the act, Russia intervenes, pro-Shiva sects develop, and the whole fabric of civilization begins to shred. Shiva is eventually diverted, moves into orbit, and is slated to become a space station, ending all these woes. Of main interest, at least to readers of Benford's other books, may be the way in which the bureaucratic corruption of NASA and of government in general can be read pretty explicitly as a description of the entropic loss of vigor of Western civilization as the century passes on beyond the Moon landing. Though ostensibly a tale of human valor and technological triumph against almost insuperable odds, beneath all those acres of blockbuster filibustering there is a fin-de-siecle melancholy to the book, telling us that not all is well, and even suggesting a few reasons for our sense of unease. It's some compensation for all the nonsense on top.

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The case of Barry N. Malzberg becomes yet more complex with the publication of a new collection of short fiction, by no means all of it science fiction or fantasy, though Doubleday continues to market him as a genre product. *The Man Who Loved the Midnight Lady,* which assembles stories written for the most part over the past half decade, further deepens the sense of perplexity, of alarmed alienated implication, one feels on entering his calcined, solipsistic universe. Once again, these stories present a world whose colors have been ashed down into a desolate, grey, weirdly primitive tonal inscape dominated, at least in the stories he himself seems to consider his finest work, by that dense monomaniacal single voice with which his readers have become painfully familiar over the past decade or so, thoroughly to their advantage, because it is a powerful tool. Always it is the same voice, grey, flat, intense, obsessive, unstoppable, almost always couched in a claustrophobic narrative present tense, and seemingly humorless. But here's a rub. As he makes clear in the remarkably modest, revealing, intelligent commentary he has supplied for this publication, Malzberg thinks that he is at times a *funny* writer. *Malzberg?* There is a shock of revelation in this, and maybe it's not entirely the reader's fault if the element of hilarity in many Malzberg stories tends to escape him (see below). I personally had the same incapacity—to register humorousness—with another, very different American writer, William Faulkner. Because of the deadpan ferocity, the claustrophobic *closeness* of his manner of telling his horrific tall tales, because I could not escape his unblinking eye, I could not get the distance to register the appalling hilarity of what he was saying, until (on some occasion) I was told he was funny, and suddenly realized I had been blind to it. If he shares nothing else with Faulkner (and I rather suspect he's closer to Faulkner than to some of the writers he homages in this volume, like Damon Runyon), Malzberg does certainly share that claustrophobic unblinking eye, and I did find his claim to be funny to work as a releaser in the same way. Because the eye winked! That loony urban driving trapped voice *knows what it is!*

All the same, when the voice comes at us in all its purity, solipsistic, perspectiveless, tortured, self-mutilated, as in stories like "Here, for Just a While," or "In the Stocks", then it's not at all surprising that one tends to miss graduations in the tone, a twitch of the eyebrow. Though he's certainly at his most intense in stories like these, it could certainly be argued that Malzberg comes closer to genuine mastery in stories written more or less to order, like "Indigestion," or the non-sf or fantasy tales he published in *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine,* like "Varieties of Religious Experience," or the superb collaborations with Bill Pron-

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zini, the best of which is probably "Another Burn-out Case"; it is also very hilarious.

There is also the sense that *The Man Who Loved the Midnight Lady* is a transitional collection, and that Malzberg, after dozens of books, may only now be coming into full control of his complete range. Certainly the sharp density of many of these stories strikes a note of relief and anticipation, especially after some of the tired novels of the mid 70s. It feels good to be able to hope.

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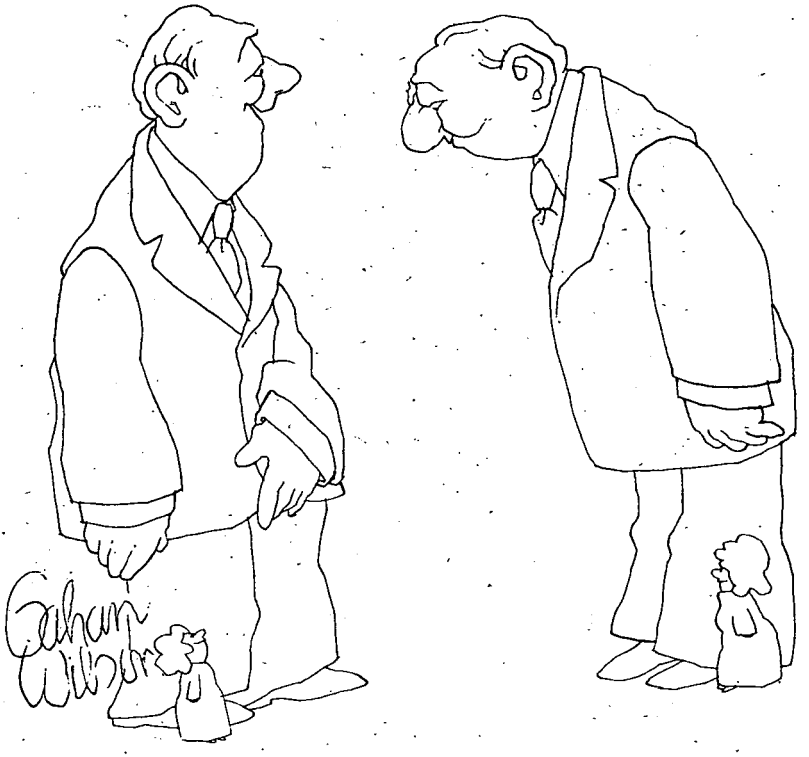

"...and this is my little woman!"

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Mr. Hogan's first F&SF tale is short and pointed and amusing enough so that we print it despite the risk of incurring the displeasure of Jane Fonda and many others.

Neander-Tale

BY

JAMES P. HOGAN

Artificial fire!? Waddya mean 'artificial fire'? What the hell is artificial fire?" Ug scowled down from beneath heavy close-knit Neanderthal brows at the tangle-haired, bearskin-clad figure squatting in front of him. Og was leaning forward to peer intently into the pile of sticks and twigs that he had built between two stones in the clearing where the trail from the stream widened on its way up towards the rock terrace fronting the caves. He seemed unperturbed by Ug's pugnacious tone; Ug was standing with his club still slung across his shoulder, which meant that, for once, he was not in a trouble-making mood that day.

"It's the same as you get when lightning hits a tree," Og replied cheerfully as he began rubbing two sticks vigorously together in the handful of moss which he had placed underneath the twigs. "Only this way you don't need the lightning."

"You're crazy," Ug declared bluntly.

"You'll see. Just stand there a couple of seconds longer and then tell me again that I'm crazy."

A wisp of smoke puffed out from the moss and turned into a blossom of flame which quickly leaped up through the twigs and engulfed the pile. Og straightened up with a satisfied grunt while Ug emitted a startled shriek and jumped backwards, at the same time hurriedly unslinging his club.

"Now tell me again that I'm crazy, Og invited.

Ug's gasp was a mixture of terror, awe and incredulity.

"Holy sabre-cats, don't you know that stuff's dangerous? It can take out a whole block of the forest in the dry season. Get rid of it for chrissakes, willya!"

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"It's okay between those rocks. Anyhow, I don't want to get rid of it. I was wondering if we could figure out how to use it for something."

"Like what?" Ug continued to stare nervously at the crackling pile and kept himself at a safe distance. "What could anybody do with it, besides get hurt?"

"I don't know. All kinds of things...." Og frowned and scratched his chin. "For instance, maybe we wouldn't have to kick people out of the caves and make them trek a half mile down to where the hot springs are whenever they start to smell bad."

"How else are they gonna clean up?"

"Well, I was thinking...maybe we could use this to make our own hot water right there in the caves and save all the hassle. Think what a difference that would make to the girls. They wouldn't—"

"WHAT!" Ug cut him off with a shout that echoed back from the rocks above. "You wanna take that stuff *inside* the caves? You are crazy! Are you trying to get us all killed? Even the mammoths take off like bats outa hell if they catch so much as a whiff of that stuff. Anyhow, how could you make water hot with it? It'd burn through the skins."

"So you don't put it in skins. You put it in something else...something that won't burn."

"Such as what?"

"Hell, I don't know yet," Og yelled, at last losing his patience. "It's a brand new technology. Maybe some kind of stone stuff...."

The sounds of running feet and jabbering voices from just around the bend in the trail above interrupted them. A few moments later Ag, the Vice-Chief, rushed into the clearing, closely followed by about twenty of the tribespeople.

"What's going on down here?" Ag demanded. "We heard shouting... ARGH! FIRE! There's fire in the valley. FLEE FOR YOUR LIVES! FIRE IN THE VALLEY!" The rest took up the cry and plunged back into the undergrowth in all directions. The trees all around reverberated with the sounds of colliding bodies and muffled curses, while Og continued to stare happily at his creation and Ug watched nervously from a few paces back. Then silence descended. After a while bearded faces began popping one by one out of the greenery on all sides. Ag re-emerged from behind a bush and approached warily.

"What's this?" he enquired, looking from Ug to Og and back again. "There hasn't been a storm for weeks. Where did that come from?"

"Og made it," Ug told him.

"'*Made* it'? What are you talking about—'made it'? This some kinda joke or sump'n?"

"He made it," Ug insisted. "I watched him do it."

"Why?"

"He's crazy. He says he wants to take it inside the caves and—"

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"INSIDE THE CAVES?" Ag clapped his hand to his brow and rolled a pair of wide-staring eyes towards Og. "Are you outa your mind? What are you trying to do? Haven't you seen what happens to the animals that get caught when the forest goes up? We'd all get roasted in our beds."

"Nobody's saying you have to sleep on top of it," Og said wearily. "You keep it out of the way someplace. Water pulls up trees when the river floods, but you can still take water inside without having to flood the whole goddamn cave. Well, maybe we can make our own fire and learn to live with it in the same sort of way."

"What's the point?" Ag challenged.

"It could be useful to have around," Og said. "The animals don't like it. It might stop the bears from trying to muscle into the caves every time the snow comes. Things like that... all kinds of things...."

Ag sniffed and remained unimpressed.

"All the people would have taken off for the hills too, so it wouldn't do much good," he pointed out.

"What about the smoke?" a voice called out from the circle of figures that had started to form around the edge of the clearing.

"What about it?" Og asked.

"You can't breathe it. How could people live in a cave full of smoke?"

"You fix it so the smoke goes outside and not inside," Og shouted in exasperation.

"How?"

"For Pete's sake, I don't know yet. It's a new technology. What do you want—all the angles figured out in one day? I'll think of something."

"You'd pollute the air," another voice objected. "If all the tribes in the valley got into it, there'd be smoke everywhere. It'd black out the sun-god. Then he'd be mad and we'd all get zapped."

"How do you know it isn't a she?" a female voice piped up from the back, only to be promptly silenced by a gentle tap on the head from the nearest club.

At that moment the circle of onlookers opened up to make way for Yug-the-Strong, Chief of the tribe, and Yeg-the-Soothsayer, who had come down from the caves to investigate the commotion. Yeg had been a great warrior in his youth and was reputed to have once felled an ox single-handed by talking at it nonstop until it collapsed in the mud from nervous exhaustion; hence Yeg's nickname of 'Oxmire.' For the benefit of the two elders Ag repeated what had been said and Ug confirmed it. Yeg's face darkened as he listened.

"It's not safe," he pronounced when Ag had finished. The tone was final.

"So we learn how to make it safe," Og insisted.

"That's ridiculous," Yeg declared flatly. "If it got loose it would wipe out the whole valley. The kids would fall

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into it. On top of that the fallout would foul up the river. Anyhow, you'd need half the tribe to be carrying wood up all the time, and we need the resources for other things. It's a dumb idea whatever way you look at it."

"You've got no business screwing around with it," Yug said, to add his official endorsement.

But Og was persistent and the arguing continued for the next hour. Eventually Yeg had had enough. He climbed onto a rock and raised an arm for silence.

"How this could be made safe and why we should bother anyway is still unclear," he told them. "Everything about it is unclear. Anyone who still wants to mess around with unclear energy has to be soft in the head." He turned a steely gaze towards Og. "The penalty for that is banishment from the tribe... forever. The law makes no exceptions." Yug and Ag nodded their mute agreement, while a rising murmur of voices from the tribe signaled assent to the decision.

"Throw the bum out!"

"I don't want no crazy people collecting free rides outa my taxes."

"Let the Saps down the end of the valley take care of him They're all crazy anyway."

Og lodged a plea with the appeal-court in the form of Ag, who passed it on to Yug.

"Beat it," was Yug's verdict.

An hour later Og had drawn his termination pay in the form of two days' supply of raw steak and dried fish, and was all packed up and ready to go.

"You'll be sorry," he called over his shoulder at the sullen group who had gathered to see him on his way down the trail. "It won't do you any good to come chasing after me and telling me you've changed your minds when winter comes. The price to you will have gone out of sight."

"Ass hole!" Ug shouted back. "I told you you'd blow it."

Over the months that followed, Og traveled the length and breadth of the valley trying to interest the other tribes in his discovery. The *Australopithecines* were too busy training kangaroos to retrieve boomerangs as a result of not having got their design calculations quite right yet. The tribe of *Homo Erectus* (famous for their virility) were preoccupied with other matters and didn't listen seriously, while *A. Robustus* declared that they had no intention of becoming *A. Combustus* by being ignited and becoming extinguished at the same time. And so Og found himself at last in the remote far reaches of the valley where dwelt the *H. Saps*, who were known for their strange ways and whom the other tribes tended to leave to their own devices.

The first Sap that Og found was sitting under a tree staring thoughtfully at a thin slice of wood sawn from the end of a log that was lying nearby.

"What's that?" Og asked without preamble. The Sap looked up, still

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wearing a distant expression on his face.

"Haven't thought of a name for it yet," he confessed.

"What is it supposed to do?"

"Not sure of that either. I just had a hunch that it could come in useful... maybe for throwing at hyenas." The Sap returned his gaze to the disk of wood and rolled it absently backwards and forwards in the dust a couple of times. Then he pushed it away and looked up at Og once more. "Anyhow, you're not from this end of the valley. What are you doing on our patch?" Og unslung an armful of sticks from his pack for the umpteenth time and squatted down next to the Sap.

"Man have I got a deal for you," he said. "You wait till you see this."

They spent the rest of the afternoon wheeling and dealing and ended up agreeing to joint-management of both patents. The Sap had got a good deal, so it followed that Og must have got a wheel, which was what they therefore decided to call it. The chief of the Saps agreed that Og's trick with the sticks constituted a reasonable share-transfer price, and Og was duly installed as a full member of the tribe. He was content to spend the remainder of his days among the Saps and never again ventured from their end of the valley.

The winter turned out to be a long one—over twenty-five thousand years in fact. When it at last ended and the ice-sheets disappeared, only the Saps were left. One day Grog and Throg were exploring far from home near a place where the Neanderthals had once lived, when they came across a large rock standing beside a stream and bearing a row of crudely carved signs.

"What are they?" Grog asked as Throg peered curiously at the signs.

"They're Neanderthal," Throg said

"Must be old. What do they say?"

Throg frowned with concentration as he ran a finger haltingly along the row.

"They're like the signs you find all over this part of the valley," he announced at last. "They all say the same thing: OG, COME HOME. NAME YOUR PRICE."

Grog scratched his head and puzzled over the revelation for a while.

"So what the hell was that supposed to mean?" he mused finally.

"Search me. Must have had something to do with the guys who used to live in the caves behind that terrace up there. Only bears up there now though." Throg shrugged. "It might have had something to do with beans. They were always counting beans, but they were still lousy traders."

"Weirdos, huh? It could have meant anything then."

"Guess so. Anyhow, let's get moving."

They hoisted their spears back onto their shoulders and resumed picking their way through the rocks to follow the side of the stream onwards and downwards towards the river that glinted through the distant haze.

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John Kessel's recent stories for F&SF were "Herman Melville: Space Opera Virtuoso" (January 1980) and "The Monuments of Science Fiction" (August 1980). His new story is about the day Jesus of Indianapolis comes to the town of Greenhill.

Uncle John and the Saviour

BY

JOHN KESSEL

Uncle John had been a young man, only thirty, when they had discovered the blood cancer that was killing him. The family had insisted over John's objections that he have the operation performed, have the old skeleton with its threads of traitorous marrow removed and replaced by glistening new fiberbones that would sustain his blood rather than deplete it, that would return him to health and vigor and optimism. To the neighbors this had been a frightening intrusion of the new science, but to the relatives, who would normally have agreed with them, it was a case of necessity conquering bemused scruples.

It had been a painful year before the muscles and tendons reknit and John could walk once more among them, and still four years later he was not the man he had been: from a handsome, well-formed six feet he had stretched to a drawn six two; and creases at his brow and eyes, and the tenseness of his flat muscles, gave witness to the trouble that had come to him with his renewed life. Uncle John now lived with his sister Ruth and her husband Frank, and with Virginia, just eight, who did not understand his slow, tentative walk, but who liked to walk with him just the same, peppering him with questions. None of the other kids had an uncle who was part machine.

"And that's just the trouble," Ruth told Frank when he got home from work at The Pipe Rack in the Greenhill Town Mall. Frank sat in his electro-armchair, chewing nervously on the stem of a pipe which he never smoked but which he carried and sucked on and gestured with, while his wife repeated her misgivings.

"He's become so like a machine,"

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she said. "I always feel that he's *thinking* so much. You don't remember how he was before the operation, Frank. Maybe he was the black sheep of the family, but he used to be so spontaneous, so ready to do anything —even when he was depressed there was always a sense of joy or anger or *something* ready to jump out at you." Ruth was an intelligent woman who considered herself a student of character, a regular reader of *The Newer Yorker*. Sitting on the sofa across from Frank, she wrung her attractive hands and stared out the back window to where Uncle John was somberly helping Virginia launch her water rocket, a true scale model of the *Ares I*.

"I don't follow you," Frank finally replied. "I think he's adjusted well, up to a point. Seems to me he's much more open-minded than he used to be. Seems to me—" he paused for emphasis, in the good gray husband-voice, "—that he was pretty much a self-centered snob before." He aimed his pipestem at her annoyingly.

Open-minded!—that was not the point. She gave up on Frank and his jibes. She considered such remarks unimportant signs of jealousy, for she and John had been very close, even though John was six years older and had refused to become a Christian. This had been his big failing before his illness; now Ruth's concern had moved into these new, metallic areas of behavior.

She had recently forced open the drawer of his desk and peeked into his diary in search of the joy that had departed. There she had read, in John's open, optimistic handwriting:

"Feeling much better physically. Peaceful. Much easier to suppress anger—hardly even a suppression now. Even things that worry me I find are, after all, only worries, and fear of the future has gone entirely into indifference. I am at last coming into my true majority, for all that seemed irrational to me now seems pregnant with explanation. Though coolness and reason have not subsumed all other considerations, through practice with Virginia I am learning to put them aside, and everything, even walking and eating, is much easier. Frank has been long dead, and even Ruth does not understand, so now only Virginia listens, reacts, and sometimes confounds me. But such failures become rare.

"We are possessed of a blood that is regular and entire of itself, sufficient unto the need of it and no more. I am building reserves that will last 100 years."

Ruth indeed did not understand this.

There was a "Whooshh!" from the backyard, and the *Ares I* was off for

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Mars amid damp squeals from Virginia. Frank got up and went to the back door, scowling.

"Ginny! That's enough water wasted!" The reproach was not aimed at the child.

"Don't you know there are people dying of thirst in Detroit?"

It was just turning onto the fourth year after Uncle John had had his bones replaced when the Savior came once again.

Frank insisted on reading the newspaper over dinner, even if it arrived on the day that Uncle John cooked the meal. He maintained that, since the newspaper was such a rarity because of the constitutional amendment against reporters and the increasing scarcity of newsprint, it deserved to be read with reverence, aloud, no matter what the occasion. Ruth thought that in the old days John would have reacted with a mighty display of violence, but now he seemed no more affected than if it had rained on a day he had vaguely hoped to use for a picnic. At times like these, Ruth remembered the phrase in the dairy about Frank being "dead;" she worried, she prayed.

"Listen to this," Frank said, slouching imperially at the table's head. "'National Leaders Call For Bio-Research Ban.'" His wide and innocent blue eyes scanned the article; Virginia was compelled to sit still in her place, while Ruth looked nervously after her brother, who was busy transferring food from pots to dishes. Frank read the parts that he thought would unnerve John the most.

"'Ellsworth Finch, national chairman of AFIRE, Americans for Inhibiting Reductive Experiments, called for a halt to "biological de-spiritualization," which he claims is sapping the individual American's right to cellular self-expression, as guaranteed under the First Amendment. Finch, in a speech before the Baltimore Constitution Club, said, "The right of our mysterious and vital inner processes to total autonomy must remain inviolate."'" Frank shot a significant glance at Uncle John, who seemed not to hear. He moved with a peculiar hesitance, as though each movement had been judiciously considered for some time before it was made. He carefully filled each glass to the level marked on its side and dissolved a measured amount of lavender powder into them.

"Please, Uncle John, can I have mine first?" Virginia asked.

"Of course." There was a momentary tenseness at the corners of his mouth and eyes. It might have been either a smile or a grimace.

Uncle John had never been a good cook before his illness. Now, three nights out of every two weeks, he prepared the family's evening meal entirely by himself, and these were invariably the best meals they ate. He had a way of making meager resources stretch to sufficiency.

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This was another of the changes that mystified Ruth. She recalled the first day he had asked her if he might be allowed to fix supper — that was how he had put it: "might be allowed..." His voice had been diffident, prepared for refusal. She had agreed, and she had spent the afternoon in amazement as he moved about the kitchen as though it were some sort of laboratory. The first thing he had done was to take a measuring cup and use it to determine the capacity of every glass, pot, and container in the cupboard. As he worked he would score the side of each with a metal stylus.

She could still see him, stooped awkwardly over the counter, knees bent slightly, eyes just inches away from the glass he worked over. His hand would appear palsied until the moment came for it to score the glass; then, through some effort of will, it was steady as a recurrent nightmare. She could not bear watching him, and she had gone out to work in the vegetable garden.

The meal was on the table and they began to eat. "Listen to this," Frank insisted again, waving the paper before him like a gray flag.

"'Saviour To Visit Midwest,' The papers always spelled "Saviour" with a "u," as if to give the name King James authority. A three-column stereo photograph graced page three: the Saviour was a handsome man, dark, with long, carefully combed brown hair, a thin nose, a gaze of infinite mildness—but for coloring, he was Northern Europe's dream of redemption made flesh. Frank became genuinely excited, and even Ruth responded to the call in his voice. Virginia was curious, and though Uncle John continued to eat, he seemed to listen.

"'Among the towns and villages on the Saviour's itinerary are Salina, Bickford, Dent City, and our own Greenhill in Clinton County. The mayor has announced a Jewish Exclusion for the weekend of June 16, and on Sunday, the 18th, Our Lord will meet with the combined Christian churches and will baptize in the fountain below the bandstand in Center Park.'" Virginia took a drink; one-handed, her control of the glass was marginal, and Ruth tensed herself for the spill. But nothing happened. Frank continued, and Virginia was pleased that the maneuver had drawn the attention of her mother without arousing the ire of her father—these were her triumphs.

"How about that? They're actually going to fill up the fountain for the occasion." He bowed to the paper again. "'The Chamber of Commerce has announced a Make Straight the Way of the Lord Sale at all downtown stores Thursday evening.'"

"What does the Saviour do?" Virginia asked. Her plate was past the "eating" stage and into the "artistic rearrangement" mode.

Her father took the question up eagerly for the opportunity it provid-

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ed. "Well, he doesn't just sit around all day, I can tell you that, child. Don't they teach you about the Saviour in that school you go to?"

Virginia didn't answer. She was making channels in her mashed potatoes for the gravy to run through.

Frank continued, oblivious. He took his pipe from his shirt pocket, rapped it on the edge of the table, and sucked air through it, bits of spittle in the stem making tiny *ptfh-ptfh* sounds.

"The Saviour is Our Lord Jesus Christ, come again to earth. He's come because He's seen all the bad things we've done, Ginny, and He wants to make it right. He's going to burn away the sins of the world and open the eyes of the unbelievers. This is the last chance for all those unbelievers, the atom-bomb makers and the defilers of churches and the men in white coats who fill people full of juices made from moldy bread." Frank was looking at Uncle John, who was wiping his plate in concentric circles with a piece of bread. "Really, Ginny, I'm surprised you haven't heard all this in social studies."

"Of course she has," Ruth interrupted. "She's just being stubborn."

"She has no monopoly on stubbornness in this family." He took the pipe from his mouth and rapped it on the table again, louder this time. "Has she, John?"

"Does the Saviour live in our country, Daddy?"

"He belongs to all the people, all the good people all over the world. He even visits Israel. But his headquarters is in Indianapolis, because he was born in Indiana this time and it wouldn't be fair if Bethlehem got him two times in a row. That's why we call him Jesus of Indianapolis, honey...." Frank was really feeling his rhetorical oats, and Ruth dreaded the confrontation she could see coming. The pipe was a live, manic thing now, and it did half the talking in Frank's waving hand.

"Yessir. No crucifixion this time—we learned our lesson." Uncle John took a drink, listening. "We know how to take care of God this time. We let him do his good work without troubling him with questions like Pilate did. 'What is truth?'—how silly! We just wait, and when Jesus finishes his life as a man—when he dies—well, then we all arise to our reward in the Last Judgment. No excuses gonna do any good then. Are you ready, Ginny?"

"Right now? Gee—" Her father scowled, and Virginia thought better. "I—I guess so."

"You guess so! Well, I hope so! I hope we're all ready when the time comes."

Ruth saw her chance. "Come now. Let's all clean up the table. Okay?"

Frank was disinclined to leave off expounding, and John apparently did not want to stop listening. There was no sign that Frank's digs were bothering him.

"So, John," Frank swerved to a dif-

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ferent tack, "are you going to go see the Saviour when he comes to town? Never can tell what it might do for you. He might take to you, old man—might cure your bodily ills."

"His timing could be better," Uncle John replied. "He's about four years too late for me. Still...."

"Too late!" Frank got up momentum for a livid fit. "It was too late for you when you renounced—"

John had not stopped; like a missile or a government, once set in motion he would continue to his end. "—I think it would be nice to go to the park with Virginia that Sunday. If you will permit me. Will that be all right, Ruth?"

Without waiting for an answer, he rose unsteadily and walked slowly back to his room at the rear of the house. Frank's pipe poised motionless halfway to his mouth.

It's Sunday, Virginia thought, Sunday!

Her mother and father had gotten up early and rushed off to a pre-service prayer meeting and breakfast with the Ellmans, and she and Uncle John had the house to themselves, had lots of time to prepare for the glorious afternoon walk to the park. Sunday! And Mary Lou and Dolly Brent would be in the park too, and they could run off and play, and Virginia could pretend her Uncle John had told her many secrets that she would refuse, absolutely refuse, to tell to any of them. And when they talked about Jesus and if Billy Fell mocked her, she could hold her uncle's differentness over them and make them think again and wonder what Ginny knew that they didn't, and she'd be wearing her new dress, too. Sunday!

But he was so slow. Virginia was already set to go, "Full of pep and vinegar," Uncle John said, "waiting for this old fellow." And he didn't laugh, though Ginny thought there were laughs in the words, and still he walked about the kitchen in his fuzzy blue bathrobe. The sun was streaming in past the white curtains of the kitchen window, dividing the table with a broad band, the air dancing with dust motes; Uncle John sat at the table directly in the path of the light, squinting severely, but he would not move to another chair. Does it hurt him too much to move, Virginia wondered? Does he like it in the sun?

"Can we go now, Uncle John?" she pleaded.

"As soon as I finish my coffee and get dressed, Virginia." He always called her Virginia.

"I'll get everything ready," she said and rushed off to the back bedroom. Once there, her curiosity took over; she rummaged through the drawers of his dresser, selected a pair of heavy brown socks and a thick pair of gloves for him to wear—the gloves he wore whenever the chills came upon him because someone had forgotten when they rebuilt him that the new bones did

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not conduct heat in the same way that his old ones had. It was a struggle for Virginia to decide which shirt to pick. She chose a bright yellow and violet pinstriped one, and she took as well a baggy pair of out-of-style pants.

Then, taken by an impulse to mischief, she tied the laces of Uncle John's shoes together in one tremendous, snarled, child-intricate knot; she wanted to see what he would do. Would he get mad like her father? Would he be able to untie it himself? She had a twinge of conscience when she realized that she might not be able to untie it herself if he asked her to help. It was a real test.

Uncle John came in at last, took off his robe, and began to dress. He wasn't so skinny after all, Virginia realized: it was just that the muscles of his arms and legs seemed to be straining all the time. As he put on the shirt, pausing for moments to fumble at each button with awkward fingers, Ginny dawdled around the room asking him questions to keep from staring at the shoes which lay at the foot of the bed.

"Uncle John, did you ever see Jesus?"

John sat on the bed, stooped over, drawing on a sock. "Jesus? I can't say that I've ever met the gentleman face to face. Short fellow, dark, long brown hair—is that the one you mean?"

Virginia suspected her uncle was joking with her, but as usual, he was absolutely deadpan. It was one of the things she liked about him: nobody she knew seemed so calm. Yet sometimes when he was like this she had the wild notion that he didn't like her at all, that if she had a long enough pin she could puncture him like a balloon and he'd hiss like crazy for three or four minutes, to collapse in a heap of clothes like the Wicked Witch of the West. He had finished with the socks and was about to reach for the shoes.

"What did you do before?" she asked quickly. "I mean, before I knew you?" Like an eight-year-old woman of affairs prying after previous lovers.

"Before you, Virginia," John said, slowly picking up the knotted shoes and setting them on the bed beside him, "I was a very young man."

Virginia had found an old, garish tie at the bottom of one of the dresser drawers. She wound it around her neck and attempted to tie it in front, but she wasn't tall enough to see the mirror. So she stood with her chin jammed down on her chest, her eyes crossed near-sightedly as she tried to focus on the knot just past the end of her nose. She staggered dizzily back to sit on the bed. Uncle John was studying the knot of the shoes.

The girl gave up trying to figure out the tie and turned her attention to her uncle. Uncle John was not doing anything, just lifting the knot on his fingertips, examining it closely, The two sat silently on the bed, the shoes between them. Virginia could see no sign of anger or exasperation in him, though he did raise his head to look at

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her. She pulled the tie from around her neck, and it unwound itself like a drunken snake. After a few minutes in which Uncle John tried to curl his stiff fingers around the gnarled laces, he paused and took a pocketknife from the drawer of the endtable beside his bed. With a single smooth slice, he cut through the knot.

Virginia had not expected this.

"Get me some shoelaces from that drawer," he said.

She got them. He threaded them clumsily through the eyes of the thick wingtips, put on the shoes, and finally his gloves.

"Do you know how to tie this, Uncle John?" Virginia held the bright orange tie out to him.

He took it and slowly, without a word, knotted it around his neck. He put on a tweedy gray sportcoat.

"Well, are we ready to go see the Saviour?" Looking down at her, mildly, he seemed very far away.

It was a very hot day. The time-temperature clock at the Greenhill State Bank (established 1893) read 101 degrees at 1:12, when they passed it on the way to the park. Even so, Uncle John didn't take off his gloves. The sunlight flowed down through the trees of the park, and the heat lay like a stifling fog upon the crowd—the men in shirtsleeves, the women in print dresses, all talking low with excitement and anticipation. Up on the bandstand were the ministers of the major denominations of the town, the mayor, the head of the Chamber of Commerce and the coach of the high school football team. A couple of the Saviour's young disciples from Indianapolis were there as well, wearing the traditional white Indy 500 jumpsuits. Mayor Turner was shaking any hand that fell within the shadow of the bandstand. He wore a large button which announced, "I Like Jesus—Jesus Likes Me." Ruth and Frank sat on a bench with the Ellmans. Frank was unconcerned about Virginia and Uncle John, but, as usual, Ruth worried.

Virginia, Mary Lou, Tom Dicker and Billy Fell surrounded a squirrel who had foolishly come down out of his tree, tempted by the popcorn they scattered; now he rushed in a flicker of stops and starts, in frantic triangles, trying to break the circle of enclosing children. "Virginia!" called Uncle John; when she turned, the squirrel leapt through the opportunity and chattered up the nearest tree. She got mad when she saw what Uncle John, perhaps even on purpose, had made her lose, and she felt a surge of hate, but when Billy took the failure up in a taunt, she ignored him and ran to her uncle. John looked awful in the rumpled clothes. People stared at his awkward step. The old leaned to the young in explanation —John was well-known, if not liked, in Greenhill, though few had seen him in the last convalescent years. No one had expected him today. There was too much aloofness in him; it was as

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though his very presence was a criticism of the town's faith.

Mayor Turner stepped to the front of the bandstand, into the harsh sun. He spread his hands for silence, and gradually the crowd simmered down.

"There now, there now," he said. "Well, here we all are. It's a great day for Greenhill—a great day for all Christendom!"

"Amen, brother!" someone shouted, and a few others joined in.

"I guess you don't want me to carry on. After all, I'm not running for election—"

"Who says?" Hector Farley, owner of the town's successful saloon, yelled out. The people laughed explosively.

Turner reddened. "Okay, okay. Without further ado then, I want to bring on the being we've all been waiting for—let's give him a big Greenhill welcome, now, folks—the best darn halfback ever to play in the NFL, the Word made Flesh, *our own, beloved Saviour, JESUS OF INDIANAPOLIS!*" His voice thundered out the last phrases, and the applause of the crowd thundered in reply. Mayor Turner extended his arms toward the rear of the platform, clapping all the while; the Salvation Band struck up "Onward Christian Soldiers" at a pep-band tempo, and up the steps, two at a time, bounded the Saviour Himself.

He was not as tall as His pictures suggested, and the only sign of divinity in Him was his brow, innocent of sweat on this hottest of summer days. But anyone who could remember the game against Dallas in '91 when he had rushed for 502 yards, scored nine touchdowns and kicked a sixty-eight-yard field goal, would easily recognize the easy grace, the athletic bearing of the Son of God. For all this, He looked just like a man. He was, indeed, the Word made Flesh.

Without preamble he began to speak.

"Ladies and gentlefolk—you do still have ladies out here in the heartlands, don't you?" He grinned a wide, homey grin, and the people warmed to him, realizing that besides being God, Jesus of Indianapolis was a nice young man.

"For sure!" a man yelled.

Many nodded heads.

"I know why you came here today. You're curious about the Lord God and how He's resurrected in the world today — and maybe, just maybe, you'd like to see a miracle or two."

The people began to protest, but Jesus held up his hands to quiet them, smiling in the sunlight. The robe draped away from his strong brown arms. Several people snapped pictures.

"Don't apologize. We all like miracles. Shucks, I wouldn't be half-human myself if I didn't like them too."

Virginia wondered what kind of miracle would happen. She saw that Uncle John was frowning.

"But this sick old world has had too many miracles already!" Jesus' voice

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had turned a sharp corner, and His divine anger washed over the townspeople. He looked down at the rows of crippled oldsters who had been brought out from the rest home and shoved up close to the bandstand in the murderous heat. "Too many miracles since the crucifixion, when the foul unbeliver sent me under in that glorious black moment of man's history and redemption!" The words rang sharply against the now-silent people. Several ladies fainted, overcome by something interesting. The Christ's head jerked several times in a queer, violent motion.

"Not miracles of faith! Not miracles of faith, my lowly low ones! Miracles of sin and usurpation of the holy power by the mind of man. Miracles of science! Miracles by machine!

"'Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.' You've all heard that old song. But who in this world values the meek? Where are all my Father's meek ones, outside of the grave? Who can show me one, a single one?"

The crowd grumbled, knowing the truth of it, loving every moment.

"Are *you* a meek man?" Jesus called loudly, pointing at a man sitting in the shade of an oak. "Are *you* a meek man?" He pointed at Frank.

Jesus did not cease from pointing and demanding meekness. The first time he did it, the gesture was startling and effective. But the phrase began to lose its meaning as he repeated it over and over, like any simple words you say again and again until their reality drains away. Meek? Man? The people were bewildered.

"Are *you* a meek man?" Jesus shouted. He was pointing at Uncle John.

"No," Uncle John said. "I'm not very meek."

The people around him, except for Virginia, gasped and moved away. Ruth half stood, hesitated, then sat down again.

Virginia watched her uncle's sunken eyes, looked up to the Saviour on the platform. The bright sunlight took the white of Jesus' robe, the orange of John's tie, beyond clarity, to the point where you had to squint just to look at them. Jesus leaned forward against the rail of the bandstand. A slight breeze wafted his long hair. When he spoke, the anger in him had vanished as though a switch had been thrown. Calm, direct: he sounded like a businessman.

"Then you're the man I've come to talk to."

"What a happy coincidence." Uncle John stood with his gloved hands at his sides.

"Coincidence has nothing to do with it. It wasn't coincidence that made me the premier play-making guard in the NBA, chucko."

"Was it meekness?"

"Hold your tongue, sinner!" a nearby lady snapped. The crowd muttered its support.

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"Please, none of that!" Jesus said. Then turning to John, he continued, "So you don't believe in meekness. You put your faith in corrupt human miracles."

There was a tightness to Uncle John's grin that made it unpleasant. "It *is* a miracle that I am here today. By the medical practices of another time I would be a dead man. I've been saved. This used to bother me, but I have learned a few things since then."

Jesus smiled a smile that was curously like Uncle John's. "Saved, then. I'm sure the good people here must have a few doubts about that salvation. Salvation. I'm sure the good people here must have a few doubts about that salvation. Salvation. I'm sure—" The Saviour stopped dead, stood motionless for a beat, eyes fixed, then went on. At the back of the platform one of the disciples, in a low voice, began talking to another.

"Saved by the mind!" the Christ's voice boomed out. "The mind, instead of the heart. The mind, whose questions are like subtle poisons that murder the soul, whose answers are like carrion birds which carry away the remains—digesting and transforming the soul entirely, ejecting it, corrupted, in the pit. The slough of despond itself, dear humans! Once there, no deodorant soap ever made can keep you from the knowledge of your own decay. And this is where this poor man—yea, and the world itself—lies today. Civilizations built up with not one thought to the consequences of increasing cleverness!" His arms jerked through the air as he spoke.

"Amen! Hallelujah! Truth! Go, Jesus!" shouted the people. Frank was up with them, but Ruth's eyes were fixed on her brother, who looked overwhelmed but not broken by the frenzied crowds around him. Virginia stood dutifully at his side, but he did not seem to be aware of her. John was trying to make himself heard over the noise of the crowd, but his voice was lost, and the Saviour, in His growing excitement, did not seem to hear. Finally, John's voice rose to a desperate shout. In four years, Ruth had never heard him raise his voice.

"What do *you* give them!" The words were thin, brittle, but they cut through the noise. "Tell me!" he demanded hoarsely.

"Listen, ladies and folksgents! Listen to your fellow mortal!" Jesus, seemingly in some kind of spiritual frenzy, stared as if the crowd were not there. "He throws me a hard slider. Will I strike out?

"Well, I'll tell you, my friendly son. I offer extension. Total extension. Abandonment. Reasons and unreasons. Mysteries. Love. Simple, meaningful relationships between consenting consenters. Can your rationality, your cool bony hands, give as much?"

The people in the park were beginning to lose the train of the Saviour's argument. They were tired of Uncle John and wanted to move on to some-

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thing new. Virginia, in contrast, was getting scared. Uncle John was straining upward as if every nonsense word of the Saviour was the most important he'd ever heard; she tugged at his coat, but he ignored her.

"I'm alive." he said. "I have strength."

"Alive?" Jesus' head snapped back, and he laughed a shrill laugh. "I look at you and I see a fine mind, great control, big feet, and not much life." The Redeemer's voice ran down an octave, and He was suddenly speaking a thick dialect. "Gemm'un, I gwine tell you the straight facks. And here it be: Garbage in, garbage out."

The insults seemed to have knocked some of the stuffing out of Uncle John. He stood silent.

The crowd buzzed. What was that humming in the air? One of the disciples from Indianapolis conferred with the town officials at the rear of the platform, then came forward and put his hand on the Saviour's shoulder. Jesus preached on. Another disciple had run off to the park recreation center and now returned with a small metal box. The Christ went on, oblivious of his mystified followers and the rising hum. Virginia looked up at her uncle and saw to her surprise that his eyes glistened, that he had to blink quite often. She touched his gloved hand.

Jesus rambled on, spasmodically, in a disturbing voice. Only occasional phrases were coherent now. "Vanity —of extending life—a longer death—all streams run to the sea—still not full."

Suddenly He stopped and, before the hushed crowd, turned his soft brown eyes, which now looked distinctly blind, directly on Uncle John. His voice, when it came back, was slow and distinct, very much that of an ordinary man.

"Let me tell you something, Uncle John—you see, I know you—and don't forget that I speak from personal experience. Nobody was ever saved by a machine."

As soon as the words passed His lips, the Light of the World went rigid, and slowly, very majestically, He fell over backward to strike the floor of the bandstand with a resonant thud.

The disciple with the metal box stooped over the supine form, tore the robe open, split the skin over the breastbone along the maintenance seam, and opened a door in the Saviour's chest.

"Identity overheat," he said, reaching for a screwdriver.

It was a famous failure in Greenhill that afternoon, an embarrassment to the community and the churches. The Saviour had to cancel the rest of his speaking tour, and the Jews were even able to practice their rites for two weeks before the town came to its senses. Mostly, everyone was quiet about the whole mess.

There were several theories current

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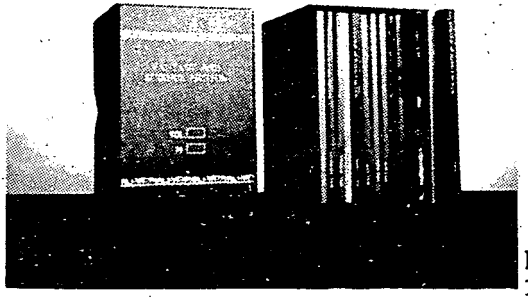
as to what had happened. Frank held to the notion that they *had* witnessed a miracle of sorts, a struggle between Christ and Satan, who had been there invisibly and had crossed up "those cheap Chinese printed circuits." A miraculous possession. To his surprise, John agreed, rather cryptically, that a miracle had indeed occurred.

Only Virginia had seen Uncle John cry. Only she had seen him take off his gloves, roll them into a ball, and pitch them into a trash barrel. When she asked him why he'd done that, he only said, "He was right, Virginia."

Ruth kept to the silence she had learned in the course of her marriage, but, gradually, a quiet joy grew in her. She did not talk of miracles, but she saw in her brother, in Uncle John, a certain opening: there was no great change she could detect in his habits; and, if anything, he seemed physically weaker than before—but occasionally now the laughter came to his eyes along with his words, and no aura of negation followed him through the rooms of the house.

In early September, the drought broke. It rained for a week, and every day Virginia and Uncle John sent their water rocket defiantly against the dead gray sky.



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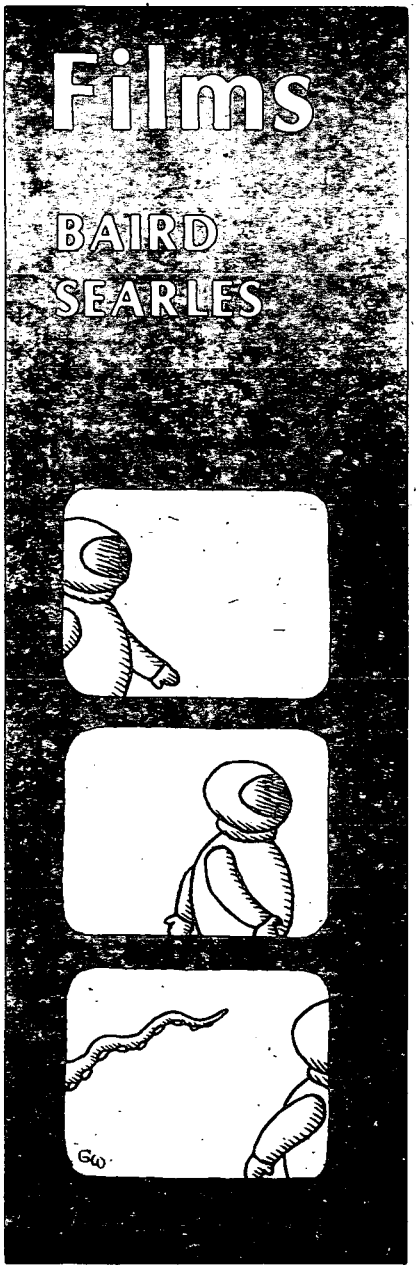

OF WATCHES AND CAGES

I am not a John D. MacDonald reader, not being a fan of Travis McGee-type thrillers. I know I read *Wine of the Dreamers* several hundred years ago when it appeared in *Startling Stories* (one of MacDonald's several ventures into s/f), but have no memory of it. But enough people whose taste I trust respect MacDonald for me to feel that he is an author of merit.

His *The Girl, The Gold Watch and Everything* was brought to us as a little-screen movie recently. (It was shown in my area in prime time, but as a syndicated feature on an independent station. Therefore, it could show up anywhere, and will probably reappear fairly frequently.) It is another of MacDonald's excursions into s/f; for those who haven't read the novel, it involves a young man whose very rich uncle dies and leaves him only a gold watch. There's a good deal of corporate hankie pankie about the rest of the estate, and the young man finds himself involved, despite the paucity of his inheritance. Along the way he discovers that the watch can stop time for everyone except its owner/operator.

It's a science fiction-fantasy "gimmick" story typical of the period (some twenty years ago), but as a film, it was delightful. Not great, mind you, but light, diverting and amusing—the kind of movie they don't make any more.

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The hero and friends (mainly "the girl" of the title, whom he meets in bed in a most unlikely way, and the uncle's secretary in a delightfully daft performance by Zohra Lampert) are likeable and highly distinct individuals; the villains are suitably villainous, and they get their comeuppance in a thouroughly satisfactory manner.

The effects, only necessary in the last part when the watch goes into action, were simply done, but most effective; time "stopped" the various characters in some pretty funny situations.

How nice to be simply amused for two hours—and how rare.

I saw a very unusual science fiction drama on television this month. A quick synopsis of the plot would be something like:

In the place of webs, a novice is brought forth from the body of the Queen, her head yet wrapped in the caul of webbing of the just-born. When it is removed, even the faint light pains her eyes, and she responds with a gesture of pain.

She flexes her body and its appendages, training it into the weapon it will be, watched by the Queen and the remainder of tribe, all, of course, females, Their pale bodies are scrawled with the intestinal-like markings that are natural to their kind.

There is a sudden flurry. A male has entered and grabbed the novice. The mating is immediate and instinc-

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tive, as is her response to it. She knocks him to the ground, tramples his body viciously and, catching his neck between her legs, strangles him with a twist of her body.

The females examine the corpse and kick it contemptuously away. The novice massages her thighs, then joins the Queen as the tribe pairs off for a sort of ritual exercise, part love-making, part dance, part battle training.

There is a warning; another male approaches. The tribe fades away, leaving the novice to repeat her triumph. He enters, embraces her. Her response is strange, even to herself. She enjoys his touch, enjoys touching him. The killing instinct fades, and there is a langourous foreplay before they mate, she caught between his legs, her feet drumming the ground.

But there is an answering reverberation. The tribe materializes out of the blackness; the pair are separated. The other females hold the male as the Queen forces the novice to kill, this time more slowly. It ends as before, the strangulation between the thighs of the novice. The tribe feasts on the body as the Queen circles her child in triumph.

Pretty strong stuff, eh? And pretty sophisticated in concept as science fiction. Even in the literature, the closest I can come is James Tiptree, Jr.'s "Love Is the Plan the Plan Is Death" and de Camp's *Rogue Queen*, and even in the latter the insectoid women of the hive are given some human qualities. Here there is simply a view of a race far different from ours. (Maybe.)

What, you might ask, is this macabre drama? Well, it's not a movie and not a play. It is, of all things, a ballet, and about as far from pretty pink skirts and noble cavaliers as you can get. It's called *The Cage*, and was choreographed by Jerome Robbins of *West Side Story* and *Fiddler on the Roof* fame. It was shown on network television (*not* PBS) as part of an evening of balletic works by Robbins.

The Cage is very short, just about 15 minutes, and is, of course, without dialogue (being a ballet neatly gets it around the classic s/f problem of alien language). The set is simply a dimly-lit space covered with tangled, asymmetrical webs. The costumes are amazing, flesh colored tights with black organic scrawls and stripes. Thus a nonhuman race and environment is suggested with enormous economy of means.

The movement is remotely based on classical ballet, but again seems constructed for nonhumans. The bodies flex and writhe in curious ways, and the "love duet" is almost repulsively animalistic/insectoid. The classic point shoe is used by the women, but as an offensive weapon rather than a device to suggest lightness; several times, the novice pins the intruder to the ground with her lower appendage.

This is an extraordinary work and is, I think, true science fiction, perhaps the greatest of science fiction works for the stage. If the program is repeated, I strongly urge you to see it.

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Nicholas Yermakov write "The Whisper of Banshees" (August 1979). His new story concerns a free-lancer with writer's block and an unsolicited muse named Fred with a centuries-old drug habit.

Melpomene, Calliope ... and Fred

BY
NICHOLAS YERMAKOV

My Muse was a raving lunatic.

You'll hear artists forever suffering aloud, whining and complaining, crying in their beer about the cruel and insensitive vagaries of their respective Muses, but let me tell you something, *they don't know*. You think it's tough, agonizing over the creative process, waiting for your Muse to smile upon you? Try having one that literally *attacks* you. With a meat cleaver. That was the day before yesterday. I managed to save myself from a grisly fate by beating the bejeezus out of it with a broomstick. Left it huddled on the floor, cowering and whimpering and sucking its thumb. You think *you* got it tough? Brother, you don't know the *half* of it!

It all started innocuously enough. I placed an ad in the paper.

You see, I was in what you might call a slump. I was in what *anyone* would call a slump. I had sold a half dozen stories and written one book, which was received well but didn't make me rich overnight, if you know what I mean. However, enough critics called me a "promising young writer" that my editor was willing to risk another advance against my second book. Doesn't sound like a slump to you? Wait.

I cheerily went out and blew all the money. Then I sat down to write the book. And...nothing. *Nada*. Zip. The Great Fizzoo. Seemed that "promising" was going to be as far as I was ever going to get. Nobody ever told me that I was going to burn myself out after one book. Of course, I didn't come to this conclusion right away. I naturally assumed that I was merely having a temporary writer's block which was going to clear up of its own accord

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eventually. So I went out and partied. Then I sat down and tried to work again. And nothing happened again. So I went out and got drunk. Things went on much in the same fashion for about eight months.

Meanwhile, my editor wanted to know how I was doing. What was I working on? What kind of book was it going to be? What was the plot? Could he see a couple of chapters? Why don't we get together Monday and have lunch?

I kept putting him off, acting mysteriously preoccupied and moody, but I realized that I was going to have to do something about the situation pretty soon. See, I was broke and there was no way in hell that I'd be able to pay back that advance. And who the hell wants to go out and actually *work* for a living? Yeeesh! So I came up with this idea. Actually, it wasn't even a very original idea. You've read *The Chapman Report?* Studs Terkel? Tom Wolfe? Lots of writers have gotten a great deal of mileage out of interviewing people and letting them tell their own stories and then putting everything together into a book. All it requires is a little creative editing and a catchy title, and you've got it made. A cinch. So I called *The Village Voice* and placed an ad.

You've seen *The Village Voice?* You've seen the kind of ads they run? Gay White Female, 25, chubbette, into astrology, kino and grouse hunting wants to meet successful Carnivorous Plant with similar interests. No phonies, please. Reply VV Box number xxx. There were pages and pages of stuff like that. How could I miss?

Boy, did I ever miss!

The first person to answer my ad was anxious to relate his experiences in the waterfront S&M bars. Don't ask, you wouldn't want to know. The next person was a confused transexual who had an operation to go from being a man to being a woman, decided she didn't like it, went back to being a he again, only they botched the operation. I don't really want to talk about it. The next one was a nice young Jewish girl from Great Neck who assuaged her racial guilt by seducing every Aryan she met and then *nuhdzing* them to death. I wasn't particularly anxious to tell her story, but we did have dinner.

You get the general idea. This wasn't going to be as easy as I thought. After a couple of weeks of this nonsense, I *still* had nothing to go with, even if my social life had improved. Then, one night, actually, it was the morning, about four a.m. or so, my buzzer buzzed. I tried to ignore it, but whoever it was wouldn't go away. I lurched out of bed, staggered over to the damn thing and pushed the button.

"Do you know what *time* it is?" I slurred.

"I came about the ad."

Now, I wasn't so dead to the world that I didn't realize that something wasn't exactly *kosher*. I hadn't put my

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address in the ad. They were supposed to reply to a box number.

"How did you find out where I live?"

"I asked around."

"You did, huh? Look, write me a letter and send it to the box number, okay? Go home and let me sleep."

"Are you going to let me in?" The voice sounded male and slightly plaintive.

"No. Go away."

"I can't. I don't have cab fare."

"So walk."

"In *this* neighborhood?"

"It's safe, believe me, at this hour, even the muggers are asleep."

"Can't we at least talk about it? Why don't I just come up for a quick cup of coffee?"

"I don't have any coffee."

"We can share a joint, then. I've got some dynamite Colombian...."

"Go...away!"

I crawled back into bed. He kept buzzing, but I buried my head in the pillow, determined to wait him out. Eventually, the buzzing stopped. I smiled and began to sink back into dreamland. The phone rang.

"Christ," I muttered, picking up the phone. *"Who is it?"*

"I really think you should reconsider...."

"Jesus!" I slammed the phone down. It started ringing again almost immediately. I yanked it from the wall. I was just beginning to doze off when there was a knocking at my window. I groaned. I was afraid to look. The son of a bitch was outside, on the fire escape.

"Look, God damn it, if you don't leave me alone, I'm going to call the police!"

"Your phone seems to be out of order...."

"I'll scream rape."

"You're not being very reasonable...."

"It's almost five a.m. and you want reasonable?" I began rummaging through my closet, remembering that I had stuck a can of Mace in there, once. Ah! There—no, that was the air freshener....

"You're really being very difficult about this, you know."

I froze. The voice came from right *behind* me. I grabbed one of my Frye boots and turned around, brandishing it over my head.

"Oh, wow, man. Bad vibes. I really can't take this on just three Valiums." He sat down on my bed and buried his head in his hands.

He didn't really look all that dangerous. He was just a little guy in Sasson jeans, running shoes, a Notre Dame sweatshirt and a black leather jacket. His hair was longish and jagged-looking, cut in one of those punk styles. He had a crucifix earring in his right ear and an Elvis Costello button pinned to his jacket. He must have weighed all of one hundred pounds.

"How did you get in here?" The window was still closed and locked.

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"It was cold outside. Look at me, I'm shivering. Can I hit you up for a cup of tea or something? Hot cocoa, man, anything, Sterno, I'm not proud."

"I don't believe this."

I lowered the boot. What the hell, there was nothing to him. You could have knocked him over with a feather, and, besides, he did look so pathetic...I put some coffee on and dashed some water in my face.

"You got any Darvon? Percodan? I've got a migraine."

I threw him a bottle of Darvon and he promptly downed about fifteen of them.

"Hey, you crazy? Those aren't M&M's, you know."

"I can handle it. I *needed* 'em."

Just what I needed. A junkie strung out in my bedroom at five o'clock in the morning. Well, he'd get his coffee, which would go just great with the pills, I'd listen to his story and out he'd go. And I'd get a new lock on my window. And change my phone listing. Maybe even move.

I poured us coffee.

"You advertised for a Muse," he said.

"What?"

"A Muse, a Muse, whatsamatter, you never went to college? A Muse, like in Greek mythology? You know, Bullfinch?"

"Take it easy, drink your coffee. It's almost five-thirty. Don't get intense on me or I'll get cranky. Now what the hell are you babbling about? I advertised for people with interesting and unusual stories to tell."

"You're a writer, right?" He gulped his coffee and shakily lit a cigarette. "You ran dry, right? You're looking for inspiration, right? You need a Muse."

"And that's what you are, a Muse?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm a Muse."

"Which one?"

"Huh?"

"Well, according to legend, the Muses were nine Greek goddesses, daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne. Calliope was the Muse of eloquence; Euterpe was the Muse of music, Erato of love, Polyhymnia of oratory; Clio was the Muse of history, Melopomene of tragedy, Thalia, comedy, Terpsichore of song and dance, and Urania of astronomy."

"So you read a book once. Congratulations." The Muse sniffed.

"Granted, you don't look much like a Greek goddess, but this is New York and given the tenor of the times, you never know. Which of the nine are you?"

"I'm a Fred."

"*Fred* the Muse?"

"It's my name, man. You want to make something of it?"

"There is not Muse named Fred. Not the last time I checked, anyway."

"Look, my name is Fred, I'm descended from Urania and I'm the Muse of dissociation and hebephrenia."

"I don't believe it."

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"I don't believe it, either, but I'm stuck with it."

"Excuse me a second, will you?" I had to get my tape recorder. This was too good to miss. The man was a stone looney.

"Don't bother with the Sony. You can't record a demigod. It's like taking a vampire's picture. Just doesn't work."

I sat down, deciding to humor him.

"And don't humor me, either, I can't stand that. Ahh, those pills are starting to kick in." He settled back in the chair and closed his eyes.

"A punk demigod, huh?"

"So what do you want me to do, run around the Village in a toga and sandals with a laurel wreath on my head? Give me a break, man. These days, you gotta blend in with the environment. In Colorado, I wore Levis and a flannel shirt, complete with cowboy boots and Stetson. Ohhh, boy, what a scene that was."

"What were you doing in Colorado, if I might ask?"

"Hanging out with Hunter Thompson. How do you suppose he ever got *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* written? He was all right, you know, he always had good dope, but I had to split. It got too intense, it just didn't work. He could never understand that at least one of us had to remain straight. I got a little blitzed one night and got a little crazed, you know? We wound up stalking each other all night. He had a forty-four magnum and I swiped one of his forty-five automatics. We must have gone through several cases of ammunition. Good thing we were both stoned out of our minds, or we might have really done some damage. As it was, when I left, the house was so riddled with bullet holes it looked like a Swiss cheese. That man's a walking argument for gun control, you know that?"

"I find that a little hard to believe."

"Yeah, so do I. These days, I'm never sure what's real and what's hallucination. But I'll do okay with you, seems like you've got both feet on the ground, not like that nut Castenada."

"You worked with Castenada? You were his Muse?"

"Hell, *I* was Don Juan. Only problem was, he was even stranger than me. I still get flashbacks from that guy."

"You don't say. This is fascinating. Who else? What other writers have you, uh, inspired?"

"Joe Heller. Some of the science fiction crowd, Phil Dick, especially. He was fun. I tried working with Ellison, but he threw me out of the house. I always forgot to fold the hand towels in his bathroom, drove him crazy. Besides, he didn't really need me. Man's never taken drugs in his life, he's just a natural speed freak. I couldn't keep up with him. If you want some real heavy references, I was with Will Blake and Sammy Coleridge. Edgar Allen Poe. Crazy Eddie, they used to call him. Ohhhhh, I think I'm going to crash."

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"I think you're nutty as a fruitcake. Finish your coffee and split, friend. Here, here's twenty bucks. That ought to tide you over for a while. I gotta get some sleep."

"You think it's all a shuck, don't you? Apollo,. save me from these cynics...."

"That does it. Out."

"Hey, don't be a drag. You haven't written a word in months, you need me."

I had lost all my patience. At another time, perhaps, when it was a more reasonable hour and I was feeling screwloose, I might have been in the mood to listen to the ravings of this looney, but it was six in the morning and I was tired and I was going to get rid of him if I had to throw him down the elevator shaft. I got up and moved towards him.

"Man, such hostility! You're a real hardcase, aren't you? Okay, you want to write? *Poof!* Write."

I froze in my tracks. Of all the nutty coincidences, an incredible idea had hit me. Struck me out of nowhere. I ran to the typewriter to get it down before I lost it. I figured I'd just set it down in a couple of quick sentences, but it just started coming, magically, incredibly, it flowed forth as if someone was standing over my shoulder and whispering the words in my ear. The next thing I knew, it was ten a.m. and I had finished an entire chapter. Talk about irony....

Now I could take care of Fred the Muse. I turned around...and he was gone. But his leather jacket was draped over the back of my chair. He was nowhere in the apartment. He could have left without my noticing it, I had been so involved with the work, but I wasn't taking any chances. I checked in the closets, under the bed, everywhere. When I was certain he was gone, I picked up his leather and tossed it in the hall. Then I went back to bed.

I was awakened at three p.m. by a call from my editor. This time, I had something to tell him, I didn't have to shuck and jive him anymore. I gave him a brief rundown of the first chapter, described my main characters, read a couple of pages to him over the phone; and he agreed with me that it was a breakthrough for me, that I was moving in an entirely new direction, experimenting with a madcap stream of consciousness style reminiscent of Tom Wolfe. We made a date for lunch early the next week, and I promised him that I'd have an additional three chapters to give him. He wondered, why did I only have one chapter after all this time, and I explained to him, lying through my teeth, that this was the final rewrite, that it was all finished in draft but I didn't want to show him any of it until I had it perfect, etc., etc.

I hung up the phone, had a quick breakfast and ran over to the typewriter. In the next two hours, I managed to write only three paragraphs. I had no idea where to take it. I felt sick.

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What had gone wrong? It was flowing so well, so effortlessly....

"Stuck again, huh?"

He was sitting on the kitchen table, his pupils dilated, smoking a joint.

"How the hell did you get in?"

"Are you going to start that again? Man, who do you think I am? I'm not just anybody, you know." He had smoked the joint down to a nub, and he took an alligator clip out of his pocket and stuck the roach in it. *"Sssssst! Sssssssst!* You want a hit off this?" he asked, his voice constricted from holding his breath.

"What I need is a drink," I said, holding my head, wearily.

"Good idea." He held out his hands and an ice-cold glass of Jack Daniels appeared in each one. I stared. Then blinked. Then rubbed my eyes and stared again.

"I take mine neat," I mumbled.

"Sorry." He blew on one of the glasses and the ice disappeared. The Old Fashioned glass also turned into a shot glass. He held it out to me. I took it.

"I'm having the damnedest dream," I said, downing the whiskey in one gulp.

"That's what they all say." My shot glass was full again. I drank it down. And it was still full.

"Hey, that's a neat trick," I said. "How's it done?"

"With mirrors. C'mon, siddown, you've got work to do. You promised that yo-yo another three chapters."

And that was how it started.

It took me about a week before I was fully able to accept that Fred was exactly what he said he was. "It" was. The Muse explained to me that it transcended sex. I asked if it could become a foxy little blonde, but Fred put the kibbosh on that idea immediately. The muse had tried that once with the Marquis de Sade and the results had been disastrous. I promised not to make any unreasonable demands on Fred, and the book progressed rapidly. I was blissfully happy with the arrangement until I became more familiar with my Muse.

It was, after all, the Muse of dissociation and hebephrenia. It showed in the writing. Not that this was a bad thing, because most of the time, it fit the character, who was a jaded New York advertising executive, slowly losing touch with reality and experiencing the disintegration of his marriage and his relationships with those around him. But I couldn't control it. I was completely at the mercy of Fred's mood, at any given time. While he was deep in the throes of an amphetamine haze, I wrote feverishly for three days straight, without a wink of sleep. When Fred crashed, *I* crashed. And then there was the time that the book took off on a tangent for about one hundred and thirteen pages. Nothing whatsoever to do with the plot, just meaningless rambling, but *I* couldn't do anything about it, and when it was over, I had to tear up all that work and

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try to pick up the thread where we had lost it. It was a ridiculous way to work, but the few times I tried doing it without the Muse, nothing came out but drivel.

And do you have any idea what it's like, trying to write while your Muse is luded out? Try this on for size: while Fred was burbling aimlessly, trying to find a connection between mouth and beer can, it took me two hours to type out the word "Intermittent." It was intolerable. You have to understand that *I* never took any drugs. Every once in a while, I'd smoke a joint just to be sociable, but I didn't care for it much. French cigarettes were about as heavy as I ever got. If you've ever been to a party where everyone is stoned and you're not, then you have some idea of what it's like, trying to relate to a bunch of people sitting around, giggling at a ficus plant. You don't see what's so damn funny, you don't share the mood, and you can't follow the conversation. Imagine what it's like trying to write while your Muse is drugged senseless and you're straight. You *see* it happening, but you don't believe it.

I had almost learned to accept even that when Fred decided to start getting into the heavy stuff. The first time it happened, I had no idea what Fred was on, but the damn thing was jousting with its own reflection in my full-length mirror, using my reading lamp as a lance. It took me two hours just to clean up the mess. Then Fred saw fit to uproot all my house plants and slice them up to make a health salad. I wouldn't have minded that so much, if he hadn't cut up five of my favorite neckties to "add some color" to it. And I came home one night from a conference over dinner with my editor to find a punk rock band set up in the apartment and playing at mind-shattering decibel levels while various creepies undulated and pogoed on the floor, grinding ashes from cigarettes and hash pipes into the rug. I had to go to a friend's apartment to use the bathroom, because seven of the nightcrawlers had locked themselves up in mine and I didn't even want to speculate as to what they were doing in there. Fortunately, my friend was sympathetic and didn't ask too many questions. Writers are allowed a certain amount of leeway with their moods and eccentricities; it's one of the very few benefits of the profession.

When I returned, a full three days later, the party had broken up. In fact, some of the guests were still there, in no condition to leave or do much of anything else. And that was when Fred went after me with the meat cleaver. Seemed someone had slipped him some devilish substance, and he had gone completely off the deep end. After subduing him and tying him up with several lengths of speaker wire, I put some coffee on and did my best to get rid of Fred's comatose friends. The ones that wouldn't or couldn't move, I simply dumped into the elevator and sent

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them to the lobby. When I came back, I discovered that Fred had really and truly dissociated. Physically, even. The punk aspect had disappeared, all save the spiky hairstyle. In its place, there was a half-clad wisp of a girl wearing a clinging garment that looked rather like a diaphanous negligeé and golden sandals. She had acne.

"Holy shit."

"You can say that again," she moaned. "Gods, I think I'm going to be sick."

I pushed the wastebasket over to her and she grasped its sides with both hands and retched.

"Yuk," she whispered, "I should have stayed in Pieria. You would have loved it there. Sort of a Greek suburb. Nice. Weekends on Olympus, an occasional junket to Rhodes....*Now* what've I got? An evening at The Bottom Line or Friday night on Fire Island. Some choice."

"Why did you leave?"

"Times change. Too many tourists. Besides, you go to where the work is."

"Fred, old bo—uh, ole girl?"

"Just Fred, don't get hung up about it."

"Fred, we've got to do something about you, this has gone too far. Have you ever tried methadone?"

"Are you kidding? I've tried *everything*. I've even done some stuff that hasn't been invented yet. Pan turned me on to something once he called Ambrosia Dust. Gods, what a rush!"

"What's it do?"

"Where do you think typhoons come from? The disco crowd would kill to get their hands on that stuff."

"You can't go on like this, Fred. You'll burn yourself out."

"Forget it. I'm perpetually burnt out. It's my job. I've been like this for centuries. It does kind of wear you down, though." Fred started retching once again.

"Aw, *look* at you! It's disgusting."

"You're telling me? I can hardly move. Hey, look around, maybe somebody left a few reds lying around."

"No, this has got to stop. I don't know about you, but I can't take it anymore. I'm going off my rocker. I'm afraid to go to sleep at night, for fear you'll carve me up while I'm in bed. And I can't work like this. It simply isn't worth it. At this point, I'd just as soon go out and get a job in advertising."

"So. This is the kiss-off, is that it?"

"No, I can't just turn my back on you like this. Muse or no Muse, Fred, you're about to get dried out."

"You mean go straight? The reality trip? I don't think I could handle that. I need chemicals to help me cope, I couldn't face the world without them."

"Sure you could. It's not so bad."

"*It's not so bad?* you mean the Energy Crisis, Mork and Mindy, Jerry Brown, the IRT, and Barry Manilow? No, thanks. I'd rather face blue meanies."

"You're exaggerating."

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"Have you ever *seen* Mork and Mindy?"

"C'mon, Fred, I'm putting you to bed. We'll talk again after you've slept it off."

"You talk, I'll just lie here and die quietly."

It wasn't easy.

Ever try to live with a Muse going through withdrawal? Fred kept backsliding. After all, a Muse can pop in and out at will. In a weak moment, I tricked Fred into swearing an oath to Zeus that she'd stay put. And that was when the rough stuff started. One afternoon, she turned into a Hell's Angel and wrecked half the apartment before she passed out. Another time, she made it rain and thunder for three days and nights and ruined my rugs and all my furniture, not to mention the complaints from the neighbors about the noise and water leaking through the ceiling.

It took about a month before the turning point. After all, a drug habit that's several centuries old, at least, is kind of hard to break. Eventually, Freddi quieted down and even started eating regularly. She filled out quite nicely, as a matter of fact, and her skin cleared up. And she became a firm advocate of health foods, stocking my refrigerator with Perrier and fruit and boxes of granola. We began to spend our mornings jogging around the reservoir, and she enrolled in a Tai Chi class.

Amazingly enough, I managed to finish my book in time for the deadline. My editor was crazy about it, and not only did it become a bestseller, but it made the Book of the Month Club, and my agent is currently negotiating the sale of screen rights.

The money started coming in, and I could finally afford all the things I ever wanted. I got a six-figure advance for my next novel, and Freddi and I got married and moved to a split-level home in Levittown. Freddi's writing gothic novels and, as it turned out, she's got quite a flair for it. Only one thing worries me.

Last night, she told me she was pregnant.

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From Mr. Secrett's library emerges the story of Cav Bellamy, who voyages to an island in Micronesia to track down a deity who provides exactly what his worshipers want.

The Man With A God That Worked

BY

JOHN BRUNNER

It was no use dodging the issue any longer. If I was ever to trace this guy with scientific proof of God, I must pay another call on Mr. Secrett.... a prospect which did not fill me with delight.

And why—one might well inquire—should a sceptic like myself spend time on such a fruitless quest?

Ask my literary agent. Ask my bank manager. Ask the inventor of money, who I suspect was Satan. Or if you don't have a spell to raise him, ask his adopted son Laszlo Perkins.

You doubtless recognize the name, since it's been splashed in huge black type across countless second-rate newspapers. He wrote (or at any rate is credited with writing) such international best-sellers as *Jesus Lives and Is in Orbit, You Too Can Be Superhuman*, and *The Spaceships of Stonehenge*.

His agent—who is also mine—was recently obliged to remind him that he had taken a £50,000 advance on his next "masterpiece," *What the Scientists Are Trying to Hide*, that the deadline was three months ago, and that he had not yet begun, let alone completed, his research.

Mr. Perkins, I gather, resented this reminder, since he was currently committed to go swanning off to the Costa Smeralda with a millionaire chum and a yacht-load of women, but was prevailed upon to part with ten percent of his advance in order to hire some idiot to do his legwork. My hopes of making a fortune out of Hollywood having been dashed for the umpteenth time,* Mr. Agent tossed me the assignment, knowing—blast him—that *I* have

*See "The Man who Understood Carboniferous Flora," Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction, *April, 1978.*

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never yet missed a deadline.

Nor have I ever received an advance that big. I mean, as big as five thousand.

As it turned out, the research was a lot more fun than I'd expected, and by the ten-week mark I'd already hinted to—our—agent that the publisher might do worse than fire Perkins and hire me instead. At least, I dared claim, I could distinguish sense from nonsense, and so I'd avoided stealing wholesale from *The Morning of the Magicians*—which, according to the assignment list I'd been given, had been Perkins's original plan—and doubtless thereby saved us from a suit for plagiarism.

"That has nothing to do with it," Mr. Agent told me crossly and phoned the publisher to retail yet another set of colorable lies about how hard Perkins was working on the project and how much he needed an additional advance for his research.

Oh, well, you can't win 'em all.

But it would be awfully nice to win one, occasionally.

This one I think I must definitely have lost. Though I'm not sure. I mean, not absolutely sure. I—

Look, it went this way.

On my assignment list (such as it was, being chiefly a packet of photocopied press-cuttings dating from what I think of as the "safe zone" where you find most of the "evidence" advanced by psychical-research groups; *i.e.*, back where all the witnesses are good and dead) I found one intriguing oddment. Much of the rest I already vaguely knew about; Mr. Perkins has a gift—if he has one at all—for ringing bells in the minds of the half-informed: "that sounds familiar!"

The aforementioned oddment consisted in a single allusion, virtually an aside, in *The Times'* report of a speech given to the Royal Society in 1924 by Professor Eric Sawfreed. He spoke disparagingly of "those who imagine that science can decide between the competing claims of various religions, and—worse yet—those unfortunates like the late Mr. Bellamy who swear it has already done so."

Now that struck a distinct chord in memory. Would this not be Cavendish Alsop Bellamy, referred to in an essay by J.B.S. Haldane—or was that one by Amyas King? At all events it was worth following up, if only for my own amusement; I had two weeks to go before my allotted three months expired, and even though I'd already amassed enough material for Perkins to make two books from, once it was puffed out with his customary bombast, I could imagine my agent's reaction if I turned the stuff in now. He'd say, "Well, since you have the time to spare, you might as well knock the material into shape."

And ghost-writing I will not stoop to. Or at least not until I absolutely must....

Anyway, I might be able to use the

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research for an article.

So I consulted the *Proceedings of the Royal Society*, knowing how finicky they are about proper references, and, sure enough, there was the one I wanted: $-\pm$ *JRSAL* vol. XL pp. 17-72. It didn't take much insight to figure out that the abbreviation stood for *Journal of the Royal Society for Applied Linguistics*.

I was doing my research, as usual, in the technical library closest to my home—it saves bus fares — and usually its stock is comprehensive. Therefore I was more than a trifle annoyed when my request card was returned with a note stating that the only run of *JRSAL* left in London was housed at the Society's own library.

"Something to do with the Blitz, I think," the librarian said apologetically.

"Oh, well," I said, and resolved to shrug the matter off.

Unfortunately, when something like that gets hold of my mind, it makes for insomnia and lack of concentration, and I was able to stand the pressure for only three days before grumpily giving in and making my way to that gloomy library over which Mr. Secrett presides, assisted by his glum-faced, gray-complexioned, untalkative deputies. I wasn't certain whether they were worse with or without him. So I dishonestly compromised and arrived sharp at 1:45, when I could be fairly sure of missing him but certain, if I needed to consult him, that he would return in a little while.

My spirits lightened, however, immediately I noticed that in Mr. Secrett's usual place sat a pert-faced young woman with curly dark hair, wearing a bright yellow shirt and a bright red skirt. She favored me with a flashing smile as I proffered my "Privileged Visitor" card, and on reading my name uttered a pleased exclamation.

"Why, Mr. Scrivener! Mr. Secrett has often talked about you to me. I'm afraid he won't be back just yet—he had a lunch appointment—but if there's anything I can do to help in the meantime....?"

She was such a complete contrast to the zombies who usually composed the staff here, I had lost track for a moment of my reason for coming. I managed at last to utter a garbled statement involving "The Society" and "Journal" and "Volume Forty," and she departed with a promise to find it for me.

And came back in next to no time with a thin octavo volume bound in some cheap Victorian substitute for leather. Slapping dust off it, she tried not to cough.

"Goodness, I don't suppose anyone has consulted that in fifty years!" she exclaimed. And I was inclined to agree with her as soon as I opened the book. Why should they? All it contained was an endless series of minutes, some referring to long-forgotten theological controversies, some to quarrels over the correct translation of Biblical im-

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agery—the sheep and the shepherd, for instance, in a version of St. Mark's Gospel destined for people who had never seen a sheep. (That one caught my eye in particular, because a missionary who had been there claimed with the authority of experience that the only possible image was of the shark and the pilot fish, the shark being greatly respected because it was the only other species known, apart from man, that ate human flesh. At that point I felt conviction was overcoming logic. So I quit.)

Turning back to the book's title page, I figured out the mistake. This was the *Proceedings* of the Society: a mechanical record of its day-to-day—or more precisely quarter-to-quarter—business, with much emphasis on the menu for the annual dinner.

Besides, the date was 1888, far too early for Cavendish Bellamy.

I explained as politely as I could that what I wanted was Volume Forty of the *Journal*, and the young lady's face fell and she vanished in a flurry of apologies. But they were as nothing to what she was trying to express when she returned.

"Mr. Scrivener, the volume you want isn't there! According to the card index, it ought to cover three issues in 1913 and three in 1914. But it simply isn't on the shelf!"

"Don't tell me — let me guess!" boomed an uncharacteristically jovial voice from behind me. "The man with the dustbin mind, the abominable Laszlo Perkins, has heard about poor old Cav Bellamy and is determined to rake over his ashes!"

I turned with a sickly grin and a sinking heart. It was obvious that Mr. Secrett had enjoyed his lunch and that it was chiefly liquid. Worse still, through whatever mysterious grapevine furnishes his information, he was once more *au fait* with the ridiculous shifts I was reduced to in order to scrape a living. Next he would clap me on the shoulder, most likely, and observe that I too, like himself, was a person destined by Fate for the *culs-de-sac* of history and that was why we get on so well together. He is invincibly persuaded that we do get on well, and I dare not disabuse him.

By a minor miracle, however, just at that moment the afterlunch influx began. The library, despite its stale and dusty atmosphere, has undergone something of a revival recently, its clients being chiefly students from former colonial countries in search of their national history, and often it was only missionaries of the kind who belonged to the Society who were bothering to take notes. So I was saved from the worst of my ordeal—which would have been admitting to that bright and charming young lady what I was working on.

Saved? Well, that would be an exaggeration, candidly. But at least the crisis was postponed for a few minutes, until a dozen or so smiling Africans,

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many in tribal dress, had each been furnished with a stack of otherwise unobtainable information. By that time I had sufficiently recovered my wits to be able to banter with Mr. Secrett when he resumed his usual chair.

"And how did you deduce that I was interested in Bellamy?" I demanded.

"My dear fellow, for the good and sufficient reason that nobody, in all the time I've spent here, has ever asked for Volume Forty of the *Journal* for any other reason."

"Is there nothing else of interest in it?" I countered.

"I haven't the slightest idea!"

That threw me completely. I stood there mouth ajar for long enough to let him get comfortably settled, and long enough for the girl to return and report that all the clients were now provided with what they wanted.

"Except," she added pointedly, "Mr. Scrivener!"

"Well, Gloria, my dear," Mr. Secrett sighed, "there's no help for that. The reason I have no idea what else is in the book he wants is because it was destroyed long before my time. And," he added severely, giving her one of his typical over-spectacle glares, "in circumstances which reflect no credit on your grandfather!"

Who?

But before I could react, he had caught himself.

"Ah, I'm neglecting the proprieties! You two haven't been introduced. You"—with a nod at the girl— "obviously read our distinguished visitor's name from his card, but I doubt you mentioned your own. This is Gloria Sawfreed. She's working here temporarily, following, as it were, in her grandfather's footsetps."

"Eric Sawfreed?" I said feebly, attempting some mental arithmetic, deducting 1924 from the current date.

"My grandfather, yes," Gloria said coolly. "He was widowed and remarried late in life."

"He was the lucky one in that whole Bellamy affair," Mr. Secrett declared mysteriously.

"What Bellamy affair?" she demanded.

"The one which set back his FRS by at least a decade."

"I'm sorry," I said. "I'm completely at a loss. All I wanted was—"

"All you wanted," Mr. Secrett interupted, "was to know why and how the 1913-14 volume of the Society's *Journal* came to be missing. And by now, so does Gloria, even though, as I've warned you, the circumstances are discreditable to his memory. Well, you're not likely to hear the story from anywhere closer to the horse's mouth, even though it happened long before I took over here. But I learned of it from Jerry Prendergast, who succeeded Sawfreed himself, and who should have retired in 1940 but was persuaded to carry on owing to the war, and who in fact survived long enough to be my immediate predecessor. I never

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thought Perkins would have the imagination or the insight to find out about it, though....

"Excuse me. I'll condense it as much as I can, but it is a very complicated story, with its roots in the grotesque rivalry between British and German scientists in the period just prior to World War I...."

At that time (said Mr. Secrett), as you're doubtless aware, German science, in particular German organic chemistry, had advanced to the stage where it was obligatory for anyone wanting to study the subject to learn German even if he knew no other foreign language. Preferably, one went to a German university for at least a year. And all this because they were too bloody-minded to adopt the international system of naming chemical compounds, clinging to their outmoded *Sauerstoff* and the rest.

Among the many students who were sent abroad for that reason was a young man called Cavendish Bellamy, who came from one of the few really old English Catholic families but had rebelled, as many do, and upon exposure to the notions of Darwin, T.H. Huxley, to whom we owe the word "agnostic," and so forth, decided that rather than choosing the law, or the priesthood, or going into politics—all of which were customary in his family—he would break new ground and become a scientist.

Exactly when he became convinced that it must be possible to prove or disprove the existence of God by scientific means, I've no idea. I can only say that it must have been either while he was actually at Heidelberg University, or just before or just after. I rather think it must have been while he was there, because I do know for certain that among the introductions he carried with him when he set out for Heidelberg was one to a distant relative: Herr Professor Hermann von Jarlsberg, whose mother was *née* Sahnfried—the name which, as Gloria has astutely deduced, her own derives from. The Sawfreeds, of whom there is only a single family in Britain, originated with a Lutheran pastor who moved to Harwich in the mid-19th century to minister to German-speaking Protestant sailors and became involved in the establishment of this Society about the same time as Cav Bellamy's father, Alsop Bellamy. To their mutual surprise, it turned out that they were both connected with a family of Huguenots who had settled in East Anglia, and this connection so tempered their religious differences that they became fast friends. Old Alsop seems to have had the vague impression that science was a variety of Protestantism. So it was natural for him to appeal to his friend for aid when his son decided to take it up.

But behind this façade of good will—Oh, nowadays people have no faintest idea how violent religious disputes

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could become less than a century ago! Why, not long before the time I'm speaking of, the villagers at Walsingham, close to the seat of the Bellamy family, actually blew up their church because an organ had been installed! Since Walsingham in pre-Reformation days had been a center of pilgrimage, and subsequently has become so again for Catholics, I wouldn't be surprised to learn that young Cav was profoundly affected by that actual event. However, when I mention it I must emphasize I'm guessing. It does, though, have the aura of a poetic truth.

So too does my assumption that Pastor Sawfreed pitied his Catholic umpteenth cousin, because his boy Eric was a model son, having taken a double-first in classics and theology before evincing an interest in entomology—which, by the bye, was what ultimately gained him his FRS. But it was plain that he was set to join the Establishment from boyhood, whereas Cav was unmistakably an upsetter of applecarts.

Yet he might not have become one on the grand scale but for something which neither Sawfreed *père* nor Bellamy *père* was aware of. To wit: that Herr Professor Doktor Hermann von Jarlsberg had, in middle life, become a virulent and dogmatic atheist, a proponent of Nietzsche's views but in even more extreme form, a forerunner of that abominable racialist Houston Stewart Chamberlain, in sum *Rassenwissenschaftkünstler* before the word was coined. To him, Catholicism was a vile plot derived from Jewish—hence, tainted—sources, maintained by the evil cunning of those subhumans who surrounded the Mediterranean, to be wiped off the slate of history as soon as it ceased to be supported by its underground agents in the Aryan countries of the north....by which he meant, of course, those who adhered to Calvinism and the like.

His own rebellion gainst orthodoxy must have made Cav somewhat unstable even before he went to Germany. Exposure to von Jarlsberg's credo must have been a tremendous shock, and it was certainly exacerbated by the fact that the professor had a beautiful and brilliant daughter, Ulrike, with whom he instantly fell head over heels in love.

He apparently went through his course of studies in a sort of waking dream. It didn't prevent him from graduating with honors, but clearly his attention was on other things: to wit and above all, how he might win Ulrike's hand without being obliged to renounce his family—for, naturally, the professor would never countenance his daughter marrying a believer.

We are speaking, by the bye, of a period around 1906 or 1907; I'd have to look the dates up to be precise.

In the end, he thought he had hit on the perfect solution. I doubt that he mentioned it to von Jarlsberg, but I

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know he mentioned it to his father and to Pastor Sawfreed, as well as to the latter's son Eric, because a couple of letters of his survive from his period at Heidelberg, dated just prior to his graduation.

He had, inevitably, run across all the arguments about the nonexistence of God which depend on the inefficacity of prayer, as well as all those which stem from the invocation of the Deity by both sides during a war, and likewise the futile debate which pivots on the justness or unjustness of afflicting the righteous with tuberculosis or scrofula or scarlet fever or what have you. But he had also been exposed to the full-scale power of the scientific method, and you must bear in mind that it was a revelation, even in those days, to find out how rigorous the work of Pasteur and Koch and the other great microbe-hunters could be made. Walter Reed's victory over typhoid and yellow fever was still comparatively recent news.

The notion therefore dawned on his fevered mind that the reason God's existence had not yet been proved or disproved was because the conditions were not sufficiently rigorous. If, for instance, both sides during a war were fervently convinced of the rightness of their respective causes, the effect of their prayers must cancel out; similarly, at other times most people's adherence to religion was lukewarm, and they went about amassing fortunes regardless of warnings about rich men and camels through the eye of a needle. And so forth.

What was necessary, therefore, was a bounded field for investigation: an isolated populace where everybody, or at least a substantial majority, believed unquestioningly in a single deity, to whom they appealed *en masse* on simply definable subjects: a good harvest, the birth of a healthy child, and similar desirable ends.

Entirely logical, as I'm sure you must concede!

But how to find such a location?

For most people it would have been a major problem. For Cav Bellamy it was easy. He needed only to make inquiries of the body to which both his father and his father's friend belonged, the Royal Society for Applied Linguistics, which was still then primarily concerned to make the scriptures available to the heathen, and consult various missionaries returning home after an exhausting spell in the tropics.

Alsop Bellamy, though still doubtful about his son's theological soundness, was delighted to learn of his interest in the field of missionary work. After an abortive attempt to involve him with the brothers of St. Francis de Sales, he gave every possible assistance. And, very shortly, Cav was rewarded by being told about precisely the sort of situation he had envisaged.

On a cluster of three islands in Micronesia, less than half a mile apart and connected by coral causeways at low tide, dwelt a people called the Bal-

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uyawang, who believed with all their hearts and souls in a deity named Humatangwaw, and with excellent reason. For he was the spirit of the largest island in the tiny group, and that was an active volcano. It was a kindly one, all things considered—nothing like Mont Pelée or Krakatoa—but it grumbled and throbbed and obviously required to be placated. The Baluyawang were presumably not very good at their supplications, for though they must have arrived by sea—I mean their ancestors must have—they had clean forgotten the arts of boat-building and navigation, and their mental horizons were wholly circumscribed by their three islands.

But what convinced Cav that this should be his destination was the report, rendered to him by at least four missionaries who had spent time there, that they were wholly satisfied with their god, for if they performed the proper rituals he invariably did exactly what they had asked for. Hence, they were as intractable a case as would-be proselytizers had encountered.

Cav, of course, wanted to observe, not convert, so he was ideally suited.

And off he set, in the spring of 1909, armed with trunks full of tropical clothing, an entomologist's kit, half a dozen Bibles in pidgin and Polynesian, a camera, a case of plates, and all the other paraphernalia of a European going to the far side of the globe. After which nothing was heard of him for three years.

Then, all of a sudden, courtesy of a captain on the Shaw Savill Line, a huge package arrived at this very library, to be opened by Eric Sawfreed. In his defense it must be said that he had only just assumed the responsibilities of his post, in consequence of his predecessor Alec Douglas having dropped dead of a heart attack at 42, and that he did at least display the courtesy due to a friend, a relative and a colleague, despite their—ah—ideological differences.

One would also like to say that he showed a proper sense of scientific responsibility, but though this may have been true at first, I regret to say his attitude changed for the worse.

For what Cav Bellamy had sent, in a huge and heavy packing case of native wood, tied around originally with ropes of stranded coconut fiber and later, since its inspection by British Customs and Excise, with standard quarter-inch hemp, was nothing less than a documented demonstration that the god Humatangwaw did precisely what the Baluyawang claimed.

It was all there: photographs, signed statements—or rather declarations sworn to by the local inhabitants, who could not read but could make their mark, and every single mark was witnessed by the nearest approach to a reliable independent third party, a surly Dutch trader called van Helsterkamp who had infuriated a succession of missionaries because he personally was a devout Bible scholar but, having

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married a native girl, declined to proselytize. To top off the consignment, there was a formal scientific paper, impeccably organized and superbly argued, complete with diagrams and phonetic transcriptions of various spells and chants, showing what was necessary to obtain Humatangwaw's favors.

Also there was a covering letter. At some stage in the package's travels seawater had got in, but the damage was limited to the first couple of pages of this letter. It did thus remain possible to decipher that it was intended for Eric's predecessor, Alec Douglas; that here was a formal submission for publication in the Society's *Journal;* and—this on the final page—Cav had performed the necessary ceremony, with advice from a local witch doctor, or whatever such a personage is called out there, to ensure that it did get published regardless of what the editorial committee and the referees thought about it.

The letter wound up with several lines of incoherent diatribes against bigotry and dogmatism, aimed equally at Christians and atheists...at which stage, not unnaturally, Eric decided his cousin must have been suffering from fever, or that his mind was deranged from some other cause. He therefore resolved to cable the nearest British consul and have poor Cav brought home.

While he was pondering on how to break the sad news to Cav's father, though—who was, incidentally, one of the referees to whom papers for the *Journal* were submitted—Eric casually leafed through the paper again and was forced to concede that the logic was flawless. So too was the documentation. There was a lengthy appendix giving full phonetic transcriptions of over a dozen spells for everyday use, for example upon marriage, in order to ensure many sons.

That struck home in Eric's mind. He had been married, for more than a year, to a respectable and godly young woman named Edith, and so far there was no sign of a child.

More or less absently, he pronounced the relevant spell while tracing the accompanying diagram with his fingertip. And concluded that while perhaps Cav's view of the world had been altered by his stay on the other side of it, his powers of reasoning could not have been too badly affected.

It was therefore along these consolatory lines that he described what he had received to his father and to Cav's. Both of them, appalled, announced that they would come to London at the next opportunity and—as it were—weep mutual tears over the poor fellow's madness.

When they did arrive, some days later, Eric had something else on his mind. Edith was *enceinte*. That too must have affected his judgment, because by then he—did I mention that as librarian of the Society he was *ex of-*

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ficio supervising editor of the *Journal*? The *Proceedings* were published under the aegis of the committee, and the secretary *pro tem.* was its editor, but the *Journal*, founded only in the 1870's, was our prestige publication, and was among the first to pioneer the modern system of having all contributions submitted to a panel of referees. Its chief claim to fame in those days was that it had given a platform to opponents of Darwin, so—

But I digress shamefully. Suffice it to say that Eric was strongly in favor of publishing Cav's report from Micronesia, and what was worse from the point of view of his seniors, he had a casting vote in the matter.

Bellamy Senior and Sawfreed Senior, as one might imagine, were opposed—but he had not appointed either of them as formal referees. However, under the Society's constitution it was legitimate to require that a foreign referee be invoked....

You see the pattern that instantly developed? Both the fathers were able to unite in favor of von Jarlsberg being called in, because they were both certain that as a dogmatic atheist he would scoff at the paper and assert it was worthless.

But the outcome was the exact reverse! Whether because his daughter Ulrike was still enamored of her English swain, and he was anxious to dispose of the young man for good and all, or—as he claimed—because publication of this paper would show to what miserable straits British science was reduced, *or* because the right ceremonies had been performed to ensure that the paper must be published, which is what Cav Bellamy himself would have said, he voted in favor of publication and, what is more, appended to his report holograph letters from half a dozen internationally respected colleagues.

In the otherwise dull bound volumes of the Society's *Proceedings* for the relevant year, one may still find some hint of the furious debates that raged over the subject, mostly centering upon the fact that this was the first solidly documented account of a Micronesian religion to become available in Britain, so that someone else, like the Royal Anthropological Society, would poach it away were it not snatched up at once.

Perhaps Alsop Bellamy was persuaded that his son had scored a coup; perhaps the news that, his research completed, he was coming home, affected him; perhaps he was just bored with the whole matter... but at all events he yielded, and by the summer of 1913 the article saw print, complete with diagrams and appendixes.

And created the most ridiculous furor!

Half the membership of the Society threatened to resign because so much space in their *Journal* had been given to a pagan religion, while the other half threatened to resign if the precedent

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thereby set was not followed in every subsequent issue. Within a couple of months the controvery was so violent, the *Journal* had to be issued on a bi-monthly instead of its usual quarterly schedule, and that's why the fortieth volume is the only one which ostensibly covers a single year instead of the customary year and a half. A volume is six issues, so—

Forgive me. I risk getting bogged down in minutiae again.

But a very strange, and possibly very interesting, pattern developed during this hectic period. All of a sudden, the editorial board became inundated with communications *in support* of Cav Bellamy. That's to say, one correspondent after another reported that as a result of having tried the ceremonies and chants transcribed in his paper, they had achieved personal goals of one sort or another, and the general tone was that of the "unsolicited testimonial" file at a patent-medicine firm!

What is more, to the unalloyed dismay of von Jarlsberg, fully half of these communications came from Germany....

The fourth issue after the initial publication was the last straw, so far as he was concerned. He wrote in and publicly accused Eric Sawfreed of being a convert to this alien religion, and therefore a traitor to the cause of science.

And Eric—your grandfather, young lady!—published his letter as it stood, purely to make up the contents of the issue.

Why?

Because after delivering his son to him, his wife had herself performed one of the ceremonies Cav had described, and for her it worked very well. Unfortunately it happened to be the ceremony "to rid oneself of a spouse who has lost interest." Do I have to explain that—ah—*physical* interest is what's implied? People on a Pacific island have so few ways to occupy their time, you know.

What she did not, alas, understand—what was not established in this country, although the Germans with their more rigid tradition more or less instantly deduced what Cav was frankly shying away from—was that owing to the peculiar structure of the local language, each of these ceremonies could be best construed in the reflexive voice. She died.

So, shortly after, did her baby son.

Which fact he duly reported in the *Journal*, in a frenzy of grief which furthermore led him to a physical attack on Cav Bellamy when the latter, much weakened with tropical fever, arrived on the boat train from Southampton shortly after. Poor Cav, himself, had no idea of the furor he had stirred up; his latest correspondence was a year and a half old when he sailed back to Britain. Oh, the whole thing must have boiled up into a grand scandal, because all over the English-speaking *and* the German-speaking worlds people who

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should have known better were busy demonstrating that Cav was right and so was Humatangwaw. For a few brief months there was a cult—confined, admittedly, to those who actually read our *Journal*, and their intimates and families, but active nonetheless—performing ceremonies designed to invoke the one and only deity who, in all of history, has incontestably been proved to deliver the goods...as I believe the modern saying puts it.

All of which should have, by rights, made Cav Bellamy into at least as famous a figure as Einstein. But he was betrayed. As soon as he got over the shock of his wife's death, or perhaps before he did so, for otherwise his action is impossible to excuse, Eric Sawfreed made a bonfire, and on it he piled everything Cav had sent from the Baluyawang, photographs and signed documents and all. This so incensed Cav—and who can blame him?—that he publicly announced his intention of cursing the Sawfreeds "unto the third and fourth generation," allegedly another of the privileges made available by Humatangwaw to his disciples. Into the middle of this row marches von Jarlsberg, all too predictably, and declares that Cav has betrayed the cause of science by yielding to the cult of a pagan deity; and hot on his heels come the forces of unreason, which have always been powerful in Germany, and they assert that von Jarlsberg is the one who has betrayed science, by refusing to accept objective evidence when it's put in front of him; and at about this point the dialogue is interrupted by *force majeure;* and before they can carry him off under sedation, Eric Sawfreed, crowing with delight, has made a second bonfire, this time of all the bound copies of the Society's *Journal*, Volume Forty, soaked with paraffin and ceremonially incinerated on what was then our front lawn but since 1953 has been the carpark.

So now you know what happened to the volume you can't find. Just possibly there may be a set of unbound issues from that year elsewhere, but I never heard of any, nor did Prendergast. And Cav, of course, was killed at Passchendaele in '17. So—

Mr. Secrett must have a gift for timing the dénouement of his stories. At precisely the moment he finished speaking, a whole wave of students arrived at the main desk, intent on turning in the books they had finished with and obtaining fresh ones. It took several minutes, even with the aid of his glum subordinates, before the job was over and I was able to say, fractionally sooner than Gloria, who was also clearly boiling over with the same question:

"But what the hell does that have to do with proving the existence of God?"

"Precisely!" Gloria chimed in. "And why are you libeling my grandfather? It was very sensible and right

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for him to do what he did, on what you've told us. He suffered a mental breakdown because his wife died, but he got over it, and he did become an FRS, didn't he?"

"I wish people wouldn't regard the Royal Society as the be-all and end-all of their existence," sighed Mr. Secrett. "What he in fact did was destroy the only known scientific evidence for the objective existence of a deity. The fact that it wasn't the Christian or the Jewish or the—the Shinto deity was neither here nor there. Cavendish Bellamy set up his experimental conditions with all the rigor that would have been required had he been testing for a disease organism. He satisfied himself that when the proper ceremonies were undertaken, the desired result was arrived at. He proved it from the start, because when he submitted his paper for publication it was indeed published, against all odds."

"But if it led to Mrs. Sawfreed's death, and their son's as well—" I began. He cut me short, shaking his head reproachfully.

"To my amazement, and I may add to my grievous disappointment, you appear to have missed the point. I did explain, did I not—? Yes, I'm sure of it! I did explain that there was for a brief while a cult in existence, whose membership was confined to those who read our Society's *Journal*, and their intimates?"

"So?" I barked.

"But at that time, when the debate about the respective validities of the religious and the scientific world-views was at its peak, you must bear in mind that some of the most prestigious and influential people of the day were *engagés*."

"I know, I know—!"

"Just a *moment!* Have I not clearly indicated that at least some of the ceremonies prescribed by the priests of Humatangwaw were efficacious?"

"You've made unsubstantiated assertions to that effect," Gloria said firmly, and my heart leapt, because for the first time in our acquaintance I could see that Mr. Secrett was disconcerted.

"Unsubstantiated!" he exclaimed, throwing up his hands and at the same time raising his voice to a pitch which provoked reproachful stares from those elsewhere in the long drab hall who were observing the ubiquitous SILENCE signs. "Well! Well, perhaps you're simply too young to register what I've been trying to say. But you're not!"— fixing me with a steely glare.

"You must be aware that the First World War was not desired by any of the belligerents, even though some of them had planned for it?"

"Well—yes," I conceded. And smiled at Gloria in the faint hope that I might recoup some of the status I had acquired in her eyes before I met her.

"You must also be aware that when the preconditions for the war were fed into a computer, the computer rejected

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the historical outcome as being illogical?".

I had in fact heard something of the sort. Honesty compelled me to nod.

"Well, then! Picture to yourself the plight of a functional deity suddenly beset with demands from literally hundreds of people who belong to a totally different cultural tradition—and moreover don't forget that we are here speaking of a volcano god! For pity's sake, man, has it never occurred to you to wonder why that war which no one wanted did take place?"

For an embarrassingly long time I couldn't think of anything to say. What I chiefly wanted to say was, "Gloria, when you get through here this evening, may I take you to dinner?" But the words declined to emerge from the prison of my tongue and teeth.

And during my muteness another student arrived with a problem concerning European impact on 19th-century Mali, and Gloria, shrugging, set off to help solve it. Which left me stumble-tongued in front of Mr. Secrett, not for the first time.

He, as ever, was ready with the inapt phrase.

"No good looking her way, you know! She's engaged to some bright young spark she met at Cambridge—not that that means much nowadays, I gather, but it may present obstacles.... You haven't answered my question, though, and I suspect Mr. Perkins, being too wooden-headed to work it out for himself, will want the answer to the Bellamy riddle handed him on a plate."

"How the hell did you—?"

"Know that that was who you are currently working for? My dear fellow, one keeps one's ears ajar, as it were, and there are publishers whose works eventually wind up in a library like this one, so.... But never mind. It would be better for us all"—this, unexpectedly, in a conspiratorial whisper— "were Bellamy's discoveries to remain where Sawfreed consigned them: in a pile of ash."

"You can't be serious!"

"On the contrary, I am so serious that I lied while Gloria was listening. If you would care to come with me to the back room where we keep our new-fangled photocopier, I can give you a photostat of a stained and tattered copy of Bellamy's original article, appendixes and all, which my predecessor secured from Germany, thanks to—Well, one need not explain war war reparations in detail, surely. Included in the spells and chants which constitute the main appendix is one which is described as being 'against someone who has taken what is justly your due.' Given what Mr. Laszlo Perkins has done not only to your good self but also to the public at large—"

"I'll think about it," I said firmly and shook his hand and hurried away.

To my regret and dismay, how-

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ever, as I said earlier, when something like this gets its claws into my mind, I can't shift it. That must have been what drove me to summarize what I'd been able to find out about Cavendish Alsop Bellamy on a couple of sheets of paper and include it with the stack of research material I was obliged to turn in to earn my £5000.

Everything else was, doubtless, handed over to Mr. Perkins. But that item came back—second-class—with a laconic annotation by Mr. Agent:

Are you crazy?

Which made me very annoyed.

Moreover I've just received, also by second-class mail, a printed invitation without so much as a scribbled initial to personalize it, bidding me to the wedding of Gloria Anita Sawfreed and Horatio Basil Philip FitzWarren-Jones. (Horatio? *Horatio?* It sounds like a brand-new perversion! But perhaps it's only a manifestation of the curse which Bellamy put on the Sawfreed family.)

In any case the wedding took place the day before the post office saw fit to deliver the card. Which just happened to be the day the Arts Page of the *Daily Mail* was largely devoted to the news that Laszlo Perkins had secured a record advance of £300,000 for his next opus: *Why You Must Eat Plenty of Chemicals.*

And was also the day when I was notified that because the Inland Revenue Service had sequestered all British bank accounts listed in the name of Laszlo Perkins, Laszlo Perkins Limited, Laszlo Perkins Enterprises Limited, Laszlo Perkins Undertakings Limited, Laszlo Perkins Promotions Limited and Laszlo Perkins (International) Limited, pending an audit of their assets, I was not going to get the overdue second half of my £5000 fee. Did I mention that I had only received 50 percent? But that the agent already took commission on the lot?

Perkins, of course, is somewhere abroad, like the Seychelles, or the Pajamas—sorry, Bahamas. Well, one wouldn't expect an untraveled person like me to know about all those exotic locations....

Hmm! What was the name of those islands where the Baluyawang lived?

Maybe I should go back to the RSAL Library and, cap in hand, beg that promised copy of Bellamy's paper from Mr. Secrett. And sit down and perform those rites which even stringent pre-First World War German scientists regarded as rigorous....

Oh, no! The notion is preposterous!

Besides, much though I would like to see Mr. Perkins hanged, drawn, quartered and bankrupted, I can't forget Mr. Secrett's explanation of the death of Edith Sawfreed.

"The ceremonies could be best construed in the reflexive voice..."

With *my* luck, Humatangwaw would conclude that I was trying to steal five thousand quid from its rightful owner and had already half succeeded.

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Barry Malzberg, whose latest book is THE MAN WHO LOVED THE MIDNIGHT LADY (reviewed in this month's Books), gives us a report on the final, cruel attack on the only century most of us have ever known.

The Twentieth Century Murder Case

BY
BARRY N. MALZBERG

I take the investigation to the streets. Footwork is laborious, mindless, dull, but there is no other approach which in the long run pays equal dividends. Particularly in stubborn, intractable cases of this nature. The twentieth century lies gasping in the intensive-care ward, four-fifths slain and in very poor condition. Cheyne-Stokes syndrome has set in. Flayed to within an inch of its poor life, then shot in the temple, the century twitches under resuscitative devices, inattentive to the solicitous concern of attending personnel. It does not look like the twentieth century is going to pull through, and who did it? Who brought this innocent victim to such a terrible condition? The case has been handed to me. My credentials are splendid; my record among the best. Still, here is a case to make even such as me quail. There is hardly a shortage of suspects, a dearth of motive, and yet the unusual *cruelty* of the assault —

I cancel such speculations. I am of a mordant and introspective turn of mind which is not bad for my profession but deadly to straight-forward investigation. At the offices of Cambridge, Hawley & Smoot, advertising agents, I show my identification to a hierarchy of secretaries and assistants, refuse to take no for an answer, refuse to take yes for an answer, refuse any answers at all until I am finally in the presence of Hawley himself, senior partner and sole survivor of the original trio who with little but faith and an insight started this agency from a ground-floor cubbyhole in 1946. He is an enormously fat man, pulverized by decades of business lunches and success, expensively hopeless affairs and terror of coronary bypass. "I didn't do it," he says, when I present myself. The twentieth century assault case is very

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big news, as would have been expected, and is on the front pages of all the newspapers; he does not have to ask my business. "I had no reason. It's the only century I ever knew; I was born in 1909; I'll never get out of it alive. Why would I want to kill the twentieth century?"

"If it dies you'll get out of it alive," I point out shrewdly.

He turns his palms up. "I tell you, I have no reason," he says. "I always had the kindest thoughts. Television, intercontinental flight, the double dry martini, the Cadillac, the sun visor. The telephone, the turbo-hydramatic transmission. Cheap contraception. What would I have against the century that gave me these blessings?"

"You leached the heart out of it," I point out mildly, "for decades you infested it with lies, institutionalized lying, misdirection, used the technology granted to dehumanize, to sell people goods they did not need at prices they could not afford for purposes they could not fathom. Having scraped away at its soul, mad with power, you went for its heart. Overcome with guilt, inflamed by megalomania, you cornered it in an alley and put the knife in."

His jaw drops but his eye is steady. "I'm afraid that's not so, lieutenant. That's simply not so. Even though you might disagree with our methods or market practices — and I point out to you the theory of the greatest good for the greatest number — I am not a murderer nor are any of my associates. We are businessmen. Besides," he concludes, "the century may pull through. Latest reports indicate that it has survived the initial crisis."

"Even if it lives," I say, "brain damage is irreversible. It will never walk or talk or laugh or cry again; all but clinically it will be dead." I push back my chair, stand. "You are to keep me apprised of your whereabouts at all times," I say, handing him my card. "You are not to leave the city without permission."

"I will not be intimidated," Hawley says. "My attorney will be in touch with you."

"It would be a very good idea to contact your attorney," I say and leave the office quickly. It is always best to terminate interviews rapidly, to leave them off balance, to leave an ambiguous threat hanging. This is one of the first principles of investigation. Truly, I am the very best at what I do, and yet I have never had a case like this. No one in the division has any experience with an atrocity of this dimension. I whisk down in the elevator fifty flights, come out on the grey streets filled with those who keep vigil and get into my illegally parked car. A pretzel vendor recognizes me, nods. "I'm glad you're on the case, lieutenant," he says, "you're the best. You'll get him, won't you?"

"We all loved the century very much," the vendor says, wiping away a tear from an ashen cheek. "Even

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though he treated most of us so inequitably, we knew that he had a good heart. We felt that he was on our side. Secretly, if you know what I mean. Most of us plain folk loved him."

Touched I say, "I know what you mean."

"Any chance he may live?"

I shrug. A small crowd which has gathered stares at me quietly. "It may," I say, "but it will never be the same."

"You get the dirty swine who did this to my century, lieutenant," the vendor says. He gestures. The crowd applauds thinly. I start the engine of the specially equipped, heavy-duty Plymouth and spin off into traffic. Truly, the mourning of the plain folk has moved me and made me even more determined to solve the case, and yet one hardly knows where to begin. Everywhere there are suspects, of motive there is a plethora.

Impulsively, I take the car north on the Harlem River Drive, merging at last with the Cross County Expressway; into the wealthy northern suburbs I speed. At Scarsdale I cut east, turn into a town even more shielded and exclusive, pull up to the gates of an enormous estate, show my credentials to the armed guard. The process is slow and rife with bureaucracy and threats, but eventually I am led into the presence of Howard Waffles, Senior, chairman of the board of Wonder Waffles. "You poisoned the century slowly," I say after the brief preliminaries, moving directly to the assault. "Foul synthetics, deadly additives, tenderizers, pollutants, cancer-causing particles, diseased meat, franchised out at a million intersections through the nation. You filled the bloodstream of the century with evil, and then you would want to destroy the evidence. The corpus delicti; the century itself."

"Nonsense," says Howard Waffles, Senior, a sprightly old man with the company insignia jutting through his lapel. "I'm in business to feed, not to slaughter."

"You never told the truth. You sold poison and called it enriched, budget-minded health."

"You'll have to talk to my advertising agents, Cambridge, Hawley, and that young fella Smoot about that," Howard Waffles, Senior, says. "I was just a man with a plan; I left the specifics of merchandising up to them. But, uh-uh, sonny, uh-uh, lieutenant. Murder wasn't my attitude. The century's been too good to me. It gave me four hundred million dollars; why would I want to lead it into a dark alley and hit it over the head? Or shoot it in the temple, as I've read."

"Maybe because you're an old man and you knew the century would outlive you. It was jealousy; a crime of passion. Passionate rage."

Howard Waffles, Senior, belches and laughs thinly; a ripe odor of franchised Wonder Waffles onion rings drifts toward me. "Sorry, lieutenant" he says, "I'm an old man; I can't be bullied. I didn't do anything to the cen-

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tury and you know it."

"You poisoned it —"

"I gave cheap food to the mobile millions." Howard Waffles, Senior, takes up my card which has been lying on the desk before him and puts it in a pocket. "I'll thank you to leave now, lieutenant," he says. "I find your methods crude and insulting. And you can't scare an old man; the nights are all the fear he can handle."

There is nothing to do but leave. Although it is very hard for me to admit this, I know when I have been bested. If I had the unusual force, the dynamism and certitude of a Howard Waffles, Senior, or of a Hawley for that matter, I would probably not be attached to homicide or to any part of civil service, for that matter. I would be in business for myself. As it is, I have to get along as best I can.

I am ushered out of the estate. Halfway down the cross-county parkway my radio beeps for my attention and I learn the worst. The century has expired. It is definitely, then, a murder case. Emotion overwhelms me briefly and I am forced to pull the car over to the side of the road. It is for me, truly as it is for Hawley, the only century I will ever know. It was four-fifths dead and poisoned past endurance, but it was still around for all of us; it was something that we could take as much for granted as the air we breathe, and now it is gone, and what is there for us to say? How will we live? Where will we go? My tears come spontaneously, mingled with an awesome determination: I will find the assailant. I cannot bring back the century but I can avenge him.

I drive directly to the huge offices of the International Communications Network, ICN as it is called, park defiantly in the executive parking lot and bully my way past three vice-presidents and the chairman of the board into the office of the Vice-President for Programming who is, of course, the real power. There is very little difficulty for once in getting through; news of the tragedy, as such things have a way of doing in this era, has spread throughout the city and vigil has turned into mourning. In corners I see younger personnel weeping; middle-echelon executives with more ambivalent attitudes sit in their offices staring emptily through the open doors and shredding little bits of paper in their fists. The board, in the nature of such things, is probably celebrating the death of this guilt-provoking century and already planning massive, once-in-a-lifetime coverage of the funeral ceremonies. But the Vice-President for Programming is otherwise occupied; he stares at me across the massive bulwark of his desk. "I don't know why you came to see me," he said. "I have nothing to do with this. I send my sympathies, of course. Perhaps he'll recover."

"The century is dead," I say flatly. "Everyone in the city knows that by now and so do you."

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He twitches back in his chair. "I've been busy," he said. "I've been working all this time. No, I hadn't heard. I'm very sorry."

"Are you?"

"Of course I am."

"Why are you sorry?"

"The century ... you're talking about a great public figure. And of course we owed him everything. What do you want, lieutenant?"

"I want to know why you murdered him."

The vice-president's mouth opens, not unlike Hawley's in an interview that is already a long time ago. Of course it would be. It occurred in a previous millennium. "I'm afraid you're being ridiculous, lieutenant."

"Am I? You had the motive, you had the opportunity. Nobody thinks of the century any more in this city; everything was twenty-first this or twenty-first that. And once you did away with the century, all recent history was obliterated. You could lie at will, misrepresent the past, misrepresent heritage, sentimentalize and falsify passion, clean up the cruelties ... once the century was gone, there was nothing to sit in judgment of you."

"That's ridiculous," the Vice-President for Programming says. "I haven't been in this job for two years. I inherited the situation."

"But once the century was dead," I say, "no one would know how long you'd been here, would they? Everything would be a fresh start. There would be no history."

"You're being a fool," the vice-president says but his voice quavers. "This proves nothing."

"It proves everything," I say. "Confess. I will go easier for you."

"You're bluffing me. I want an attorney. I won't proceed any further until I get an attorney."

"No one will be your friend," I say. "The simple people will turn against you. But there is a way. I don't think you were in this alone. Nothing like a murder of the century can be accomplished without conspiracy. I want to propose that you were merely a member of a group, that you had associates. If you name names, describe the modus operandi, throw yourself on the mercy of the court, it might go easier for you. You might be able to settle for a plea of conspiracy."

The vice-president's eyes are wide and lustrous. "You're bluffing," he says again. "You don't have a shred of evidence."

"I can get it," I say relentlessly. At the end, when I feel a case coming to completion, the instincts take over and I roll toward the conclusion without ambivalence; this is why I am the best in the world at what I do. Or did. A new millennium is a fresh start. "I can talk to Hawley. Or to Harold Waffles, Senior. They're both clever men, entrepreneurs as you are not, self-sufficient types. They'll see the wisdom of going over to the state even if you do not. They'll hang you out to dry.

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They'll leave you alone with all the guilt."

He holds himself rigid and then his control breaks. He lunges toward the desk, his face disfigured. "It wasn't my idea!" he screams. "It was theirs! The liars! They would take care of all the details; all I was supposed to do was to take care of the media, the public relations, the cosmetics. I had nothing to do with it at all, do you hear me? They came to me! I wanted no part of it! It was that Waffles, he's crazy, he wants to kill everyone!"

I take the handcuffs from my pocket, lean forward, snap them on his unresisting, clasped wrists. "We'll hear all of it at headquarters," I say. "We'll take your full statement."

"I didn't want to do it!" the vice-president shrieks. "They had been planning it for years, they said, had to get it done now before the century died a natural death; they said they were going to do it whether I came in or not but if I did I would get a piece of it, a new ranking, a large promotion, a fresh start —"

I haul him to his feet by the cuffs. "We'll all get a fresh start now," I say. I propel him toward the door. "That's for sure."

"I *loved* the century —"

"Every man kills the things he loves," I point out philosophically.

Which may even be true, but after this is wrapped up, I'm quitting. There have already been five attempts on the twenty-first, three of them sniper fire, one a bear trap, one poison, all of them near-misses. A successful crime always leads to imitators. I am too old, the century too young.

It's going to be a rotten millennium.

Disch Wins Campbell Memorial Award

Thomas M. Disch was recently announced as winner of the John W. Campbell Memorial Award for the best science fiction novel of 1979. Disch won for "On Wings of Song," which was serialized in F&SF in the February, March and April 1979 issues and later published in hardcover by St. Martin's Press. A paperback edition has been published by Bantam Books. Runners-up to the Disch novel were: "Engine Summer" by John Crowley and "The Unlimited Dream Machine" by J. G. Ballard.

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From the author of "Wives," (December 1979) and "Bug House," (June 1980), comes this deceptively simple and ultimately terrifying new story. Ms. Tuttle has recently completed a new novel, FAMILIAR SPIRIT.

The Other Mother

BY

LISA TUTTLE

Across the lake, on the other shore, something moved: pale-white, glimmering. Tall as a person.

Sara looked up from her work, refocusing her eyes. She realized how dark it had become. It had been too dark, in the rapidly deepening twilight, to paint for the past half-hour, but she had been reluctant to admit it, give up and go in.

There, again. A woman in a white gown? Gone again.

Sara frowned, vexed, and concentrated on the brushy land across the narrow expanse of dark water. She waited, listening to the crickets and frogs, and she stared so intently that the growing shadows merged, reforming in strange shapes. What had she really seen? Had that pale glimmer been a trick of the fading light? Why did she feel as if there was a stranger lurking on the other shore, a woman watching her who would let herself be seen only in glimpses?

Sara realized she was tired. She arched her back and exercised her aching arms. She still watched the other shore, but casually now, hoping to lure the stranger out by seeming inattentiveness.

But she saw nothing more and at last she shrugged and began to tighten lids on tubes of paint, putting her supplies away. She deliberately avoided looking at the painting she had been working on. Already she disliked it, and was annoyed with herself for failing again.

The house was stifling after the balmy evening air, and it reeked of the pizza she had given the children for dinner. They had left chunks of it uneaten on the coffee table and were now sprawled on the floor in front of the television set, absorbed in a noisy situation comedy.

"Hello, sweethearts," Sara said.

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Michael gave a squirming shrug and twitched his mouth in what might have been a greeting; Melanie did not move. Her mouth hung open, and her eyes followed the tiny moving images intently.

Sara put her painting and supplies back in her bedroom and then began to clean up the leftover pizza and soft drinks, wanting to turn off the set and reclaim her children, but too aware of the tantrums that would ensue if she interrupted a program.

At the next commercial, to catch their attention, Sara said, "I just saw a ghost across the lake."

Michael sat up and turned to his mother, his expression intrigued but wary. "Really?"

"Well, it looked like a ghost," Sara said. "You want to come with me and see if she's still there?"

"Not *she;* ghosts aren't girls," Michael said. But he scrambled to his feet. Melanie was still watching the set: a domestic squabble over coffee.

"Why can't ghosts be girls?" Sara asked. "Come on, Melanie. We're going outside to look for a ghost."

"They just can't be," Michael said. "Come *on.*"

Sara took hold of Melanie's sticky little hand and led her outside after Michael. Outdoors, Michael suddenly halted and looked around. "Did you *really* see a ghost?"

"I saw something," Sara said. She felt so relieved to be outside again, away from the stale, noisy house. "I saw a pale white figure which glided past. When I looked more closely, it was gone. Vanished, just like that."

"Sounds like a ghost," said Michael. "They float around, and they're all white, and they disappear. Did it make a noise?"

"Not that I noticed. What sort of noise does a ghost make?"

Michael began to produce a low moaning sound, gradually building in intensity and volume.

"Mommy, make him stop!" Melanie said suddenly.

"That's enough, Michael."

They had reached the water's edge now and they were quiet as they looked across the dark water. Almost nothing could be seen now of the opposite shore.

"Did you really see a ghost?" Michael asked, yet again. Sara felt his hand touching her blue-jeaned hip.

She put an arm around his shoulder and hugged him close. "Maybe I imagined it. Maybe it was an animal of some kind. I just saw something from the corner of my eye, and I had the impression that it was, well, a woman in a long white gown, moving more quickly and quietly than any living person should. I felt she wasn't ready to let me really see her yet. So when I tried to find her, she had disappeared."

Sara felt the hairs on the back of her neck prickle and was suddenly ashamed of herself. If she had made herself nervous, what must the children be feeling?

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Melanie began to whimper for the light.

"She can't turn the light on here — we're outside, stupid," Michael said. Sara suspected a quaver in his voice.

"Come on, kids. There's nothing out here. Let's go inside, and I'll tell you a story before you go to bed."

Michael broke into a run towards the safe harbor of the lighted house, and Melanie let go her mother's hand to chase him.

Sara turned to follow her children but then paused, feeling that she was being watched. She turned and looked back across the lake. But even if someone were standing on the opposite shore, it was now much too dark to see.

After the children had bathed and were in their pajamas, Sara told a story about a tricycle-riding bear, a character both the children had loved, but which Michael was beginning to outgrow.

Melanie was good about going to bed, snuggling sleepily under the bedclothes and raising her round, sweet face for a goodnight kiss.

"Now a butterfly kiss," Melanie commanded, after exchanging several smacking kisses with her mother.

Sara, kneeling by the bed, bent her head and fluttered her eyelashes against her daughter's downy cheek. The sound of Melanie's sleepy giggle, her warmth, the good, clean smell of her inspired a rush of love, and Sara wanted to grab her daughter and hug her suffocatingly tight. But she only whispered, soft as a breath, "I love you, sweetie," before she drew away.

Michael was waiting for her in his room with a deck of cards. They played two games of Go Fish and one of Crazy Eights before his uncontrollable yawns gave him away. He agreed to go to bed, but insisted upon hearing a story first.

"A short one," Sara said.

"A ghost story," he responded, nodding impatiently.

"Oh, Michael," Sara sighed, envisioning nightmares and demands for comfort later.

"Yes. A ghost story. About that ghost you saw across the lake today."

Had she frightened him? Sara couldn't be sure. But this was her opportunity to make up for what she'd done, to remove the menace and mystery of that unseen figure. She tucked him under the covers and settled herself at the end of his bed and then, in a low voice, began to weave a comforting sort of ghost story.

The ghost was a sad but friendly figure, a mother eternally searching for her children. They had run off into the wilderness one day without telling her and had become lost, and she had been looking for them ever since. The story had the moral that children shouldn't disobey their mothers or run and hide without telling her where they were going.

Michael was still too young to protest against stories with morals; he ac-

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cepted what he was told, smiling sleepily, and gave his mother a warm hug and kiss goodnight.

But if Sara had protected Michael against nightmares, she had not been able to protect herself.

That night Sara dreamed of a woman in white, gliding along the lake shore, heading towards the house. She was not a ghost; neither was she human. Her eyes were large, round and protruding, like huge, milk-white marbles. The skin of her face was greyish, her mouth narrow, her nose almost nonexistent. She wore a long, hooded, all-enveloping gown.

Sara saw then that Michael and Melanie were playing in the yard, unaware of the ghastly figure gliding steadily toward them.

Where is their mother? Sara wondered. Where am *I*? She could only watch helplessly, powerless to interfere, certain that she was about to see her children murdered before her eyes.

Dreaming, Sara sweated and twitched and finally cried out, waking herself.

She sat up in the dark, hot room, feeling her heart pounding. Only a dream. But she was still frightened. Somewhere in the darkness those dead white eyes might be staring at her.

Sara turned on the light, wishing for comfort. She wanted a lover, or even her ex-husband, some male figure whose solid, sleeping presence would comfort her.

What a baby I am, she thought, getting up and putting on her robe. To be so frightened by a dream. To have to make the rounds of the house to be sure everything is normal.

Michael was sleeping on his back, the covers kicked away, breathing through his mouth. Sara found his snores endearing and paused to pull the sheet up to his waist.

As she reached the doorway to Melanie's room, something white flashed by the window. Sara stopped breathing, feeling cold to the bone. Then she saw the bird. It was just a white bird, resting on the window ledge. A second later it had flown away. Sara felt weak with relief and annoyed with herself for overreacting. Just a bird at the window, a white bird.

Melanie was sleeping soundly, curled into a ball, her fists beneath her chin. Sara stood beside the bed looking down at her for a long time. How infinitely precious she was.

The next morning the children were particularly obnoxious. They were up early, spilling milk and cereal on the floor, slapping each other, fighting over television programs, complaining of boredom and asking questions without pausing to hear the answers. Their high-pitched voices repeating childish demands affected Sara like a cloud of stinging insects. Her skin itched. She felt raw and old, almost worn out with the effort of keeping a lid on her anger.

Sara suggested new games and answered questions in a level voice.

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She cleaned up their messes and promised the children icecream cones at Baskin-Robbins if they were good and quiet in the car and the grocery store. They were neither good nor quiet, but she bought them the icecream anyway, to avert a worse outburst. She longed for Thursday, when a neighbor would take Michael into town for a birthday party, and looked toward Sunday — when the children's father would have them both all day — as to her hope of heaven.

After lunch Melanie blessedly fell asleep, and Michael occupied himself quietly with his plastic dinosaurs. Almost holding her breath for fear the spell of peace would be broken, Sara went to get her canvas.

But at the sight of it her tentatively building spirits plunged. The painting she had spent so much time on the previous day was dreadful, labored, flat and uninspired. She had done better in high school. There was nothing to be done about it, Sara decided. She had done too much to it already. She would wait for it to dry and paint over it with gesso, she decided. She felt despairing at all the time she had wasted — not only yesterday, but all the years before that in which she had not found time to paint. Perhaps it was too late now; perhaps she had lost whatever talent she once had.

But she would lose this afternoon, too, if she didn't snap out of it. Sara turned the canvas to the wall and looked around. Water colors, perhaps. Something quick and simple, something to loosen her up. She had been too stiff, intimidated by the oils and canvas. She would have to work up to them.

"Can we go to a movie tonight?" Michael asked as she emerged from her room with the big, spiral-bound pad of heavy paper and her box of water colors. He was marching a blue dinosaur across the kitchen table and through the fruit bowl.

"We'll see," Sara said absently.

"What does that mean? Does that mean yes?"

"It means we'll see when the time comes."

"What will we see? Will we see a movie?" He followed her outside.

"Michael, don't pester me."

"What's *that*?"

There was a tone in his voice...Sara turned to look at him. He was staring in the direction of the lake, astonishment on his face. "Is that the ghost?"

Recalling her dream, Sara felt a chill. She turned, shading her eyes against the sun, and looked in the same direction. There was a large white animal walking on the farther shore, too oddly shaped to be a dog, too small for a cow.

"It's a pig," Sara said. She had never seen such a large, white pig before, and she wondered where it had come from. What was somebody's prize pig doing so far from the farm?

The pig had stopped its purposeful walk and turned towards the water to

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face them. Now it stood still and seemed to watch them. Sara took an involuntary step backward, her arm moving down and to the side as if to shield Michael.

"It sees us," Michael said. Sara couldn't tell from his voice if he was frightened, pleased, or merely commenting.

"It can't get to us," Sara said. "There's all that water in between." She spoke to comfort herself. She had never heard that pigs were dangerous, but it was a very large animal, and there was something uncanny about its presence there, and the way it stood watching them.

Then, just as abruptly as it had come, the pig turned away from the water and began to trot away, following the shoreline until it was out of sight.

Sara was relieved to see it go.

That night, Sara painted. She got out her oils and a new canvas; she felt inspired. She was excited; she hadn't felt like this in years. The picture had come to her, a vision she felt bound to paint. She was in no mood for sketches or excercises, or "loosening up" with water colors. This was her real work, and she needed no more training.

The main figures in the painting would be a large white pig and a shrouded human figure. Sara hoped to express some of the terror she'd felt during her nightmare, and to recapture in the painting the unease she had felt upon seeing the pig on the shore in the midday sun. She planned to keep the robed figure's face hidden, fearful of painting something merely grotesque instead of terrifying.

She worked for hours, late into the night, until she realized that weariness was throwing off her sight and coordination. Then, pleased, exhausted, and looking forward to the next day's work, she went to bed.

The children let her sleep no later than they ever did in the morning, but Sara didn't mind. The hours spent painting seemed to have invigorated her, enabling her to thrive on less sleep.

When Mary Alice arrived to pick up Michael, she offered to take Melanie for the day, too, as company for her youngest. Sara gazed at her in mute gratitude, seeing her blond, smiling friend as a beneficent goddess, the personification of good fortune. With both the children gone, she would be able to work.

"Oh! Mary Alice, that would be wonderful! Are you sure you don't mind having her along?"

"What's one more kid? Kelly needs someone to play with. And besides," she patted Sara's shoulder, "It will give you some time to paint. Are you working on anything right now?"

It had been Mary Alice, with her ready sympathy and praise, who had encouraged Sara to take up painting again.

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Sara smiled. "I started something new last night. It's different. I'll show you what I've done when you get back."

But despite her words and easy manner, Sara felt her stomach fluttering nervously when she went to bring out the uncompleted painting after the others had left. She was afraid of what she would find; afraid it would be clumsy or stiff or silly, and not at all what she remembered working on.

To her own surprise she was pleased by the sight of it. She felt a rising excitement, and a deep satisfaction at the thought of having uninterrupted hours to work on it.

The pig and the shrouded woman stood on a misty shore. Nearby was a bush in which nested a large white bird.

Sara painted all day with an easy authority she had not known in years. She felt light and free and intensely alive. She didn't have to think about what she was doing; the work had its own existence.

"Unusual."

Sara turned with a start to see Mary Alice. She felt as if she had been abruptly awakened. The children — her own, and Mary Alice's three — were roaring through the house like a hurricane. She looked back at the painting and saw that it was finished.

"Would you like some wine?" Sara asked.

"Please." Mary Alice slumped into the old armchair and continued to study the canvas. "I've never seen you do anything remotely like it. The white goddess, right?"

In the kitchen, pouring wine, Sara frowned. "What do you mean?" She brought the two glasses back into the family room.

"Well, it reminds me of Welsh mythology," Mary Alice said, accepting the wine glass. "Thanks. You know, the pig, the bird, the hawthorn bush. The hooded figure could be Cerridwen. White goddess of death and creation."

Sara shivered and looked around. It was as if a door had been opened and shut quickly, letting in a chill wind.

"I don't know about any of that," Sara said. "I never heard of ... what's-her-name. But I had a dream about this terrifying white figure, and then I saw this huge pig across the lake. I just..they fit together into a painting, somehow. The bird's just there to balance out the composition."

"A dream," said Mary Alice. She glanced at her watch and stood up. "I suppose you don't have to know what a symbol means, to pick up on it."

Sara also stood. "Look, why don't you and the kids stay for dinner? It's just spaghetti, but there's lots of it."

"Thanks, but Bill's expecting me back. He hates having to fend for himself."

"Some other time, then," Sara said, feeling oddly bereft. She wanted adult conversation, adult companionship. It had been so long since she had eaten a

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leisurely meal with other adults.

Mary Alice touched Sara's arm and said, "You'll have to come for dinner some night soon — a late meal, after the kids have been put to bed. There's a friend of Bill's from the university that I've been wanting you to meet, and I could cook something really elaborate, and make a party out of it."

"That sounds marvelous," Sara said. She glanced at the painting again, then away, oddly disturbed. "You know, I had no problems with this painting. I never had to stop and think, and I've never worked so fast and surely in my life. It was odd, coming right after so much discouragement. For months I haven't been able to finish anything I liked."

"The muse takes her own time," Mary Alice said. "She's the White Goddess too, you know — at least for poets." She raised her voice to call her children.

Company gone, Michael and Melanie buzzed around Sara, tugging at her arms and reciting unintelligible stories about the adventures of the day. They were tired and hungry but keyed up to such a pitch by the events of the day that Sara knew she would have a hard time calming them. She put her completed but still-wet painting back in her bedroom, out of reach of flailing arms and flying toys, and resigned herself to being a mother again.

* * *

Sunday morning Sara rose even before the children. She felt as if she'd been in hibernation for the past 48 hours, dozing as she tended her children, cleaned the house and ran errands, and only now was she awake again.

In a few hours the children's father would come for them, and Sara would be free to paint and live her own life until Monday morning. She had found a few moments to sketch, and she was bursting with the urge to take up brush and paints and turn her grey preliminaries into color.

Not even pausing for her usual cup of tea, Sara pulled on a bathing suit and rushed outside. The air was a blessing on her bare skin and smelled of honeysuckle. The grass was cool and slippery beneath her feet, and there was a special taste in the air that exhilarated her. She began to run, her thoughts streaming out behind her until she knew nothing but sensation.

She plunged into the water as she had plunged into the morning and began swimming vigorously toward the other shore. She was panting so hard she felt dizzy when she arrived, but she grinned with delight.

"Come on out, oh Pig or Ghost or whatever you are!" she called as she walked ashore. "I'm not afraid of you — show yourself!"

She began to shake herself like a dog, simply to feel the droplets of water flying off of her. Then, somehow, she was dancing: a wild, primitive, arm-waving dance.

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Finally, tired, she dropped to the rocky beach and rested. She gazed northward to where the narrow lake began to widen. Then she looked across the narrow stretch of water to her own house and to the others like it which dotted the shore. This early on a Sunday all was still and quiet.

Sara drank it all in: the sun, the clean, warm air with the scent of cedar in it, the songs of the birds, the solitude. Everything was as it should be.

She was cheerful when she returned, telling the kids funny stories and making blueberry-and-banana pancakes for breakfast. It was a special morning; even the children felt it.

"You're our good mommy, aren't you?" said Melanie, hugging Sara's bare legs.

"Of course I am, sweetie." She put the butter and syrup on the table and dropped a kiss on her daughter's head.

Feeling the promise in the air, Michael said, "Could we maybe rent a sailboat and go sailing today like you said we maybe could someday?"

"That will be up to your father," Sara said blithely. "Did you forget he's picking you up this morning? I'm going to stay home and paint."

Michael's face was comical as he absorbed this: the conflict between the pleasure of going out with his father and disappointment that he couldn't make use of his mother's good mood was clearly written there. Sara laughed and hugged him.

After breakfast had been eaten and the dishes washed, Sara began to feel impatient. Where was Bruce? He always liked to get an early start, and the children were ready to go.

The telephone rang.

"Sara, I'm not going to be able to make it today. Something's come up."

"What do you mean you're not going to be able to make it? Sunday's your day — you know that. We agreed."

"Well, I can't make it today." Already annoyance had sharpened his tone.

Sara clenched one hand into a fist, wishing she had him in front of her. "And why not? One day a week isn't so much. The kids have been counting on seeing you."

"I haven't missed a week yet and you know it. Be reasonable, Sara. I just can't make it."

"Why? Why can't you make it? What's so important on a Sunday? You've got a date? Fine, bring her along. *I* don't care. Just come and take the kids like you're supposed to."

"Look, put the kids on and I'll explain it to them."

"Explain it to *me*, damnit!"

A silence. Then he said, "I'm in Dallas."

Sara was too angry to speak.

"Tell the kids I'm sorry and I'll try to make it up to them next week."

"Sorry! You *knew* — why'd you wait until now to call?"

"I don't have to explain myself to

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you. I'll be by to pick up the kids next Sunday, 9 a.m." He hung up.

Sara held on to the phone, still facing the wall. There were tears of frustration in her eyes, and her back and shoulders ached as if she'd been beaten. When she had regained some control she went to look for the children.

They were outside on the driveway, eager to catch the first glimpse of their father's car.

"Sweethearts," Sara said. Her throat hurt. "Your father just called. He's...he's not going to be able to come today after all."

They stared at her. Melanie began to whine.

"Why?" Michael asked. "Why?"

"He's in Dallas. He couldn't get back in time. He said you'd all do something extra-special next weekend to make up for missing this one."

"Oh," said Michael. He was silent for a moment, and Sara wondered if he would cry. But then the moment passed and he said, "Can we go sailing, then?"

Sara sighed. "Not today. But why don't you two put on your bathing suits and we'll go for a swim?"

To Sara's relief they accepted the change of plans without fuss. For the next hour Michael showed off his skills in the water while Sara gave Melanie another swimming lesson. Afterwards, she got them started playing a board game and went off to her room to be by herself.

She felt exhausted, the euphoria of the early morning faded into the distant past. She sat on the bed and paged through her sketchbook, wondering why she had been so excited and just what she had intended to make of these rather mediocre sketches of a woman's face and details of tree branches. With a part of her mind she was still arguing with her ex-husband, this time scoring points with withering remarks which left him speechless.

Finally she stood up and took out her paints and the fresh canvas. As she set up the work in the bedroom, she could hear the children running in and out of the house, laughing, talking and occasionally slamming the screen door. The children seemed occupied and might not bother her until they grew hungry for lunch. After that, with luck, she might still have the afternoon to paint while Melanie napped and Michael played quietly by himself. She'd had such days before.

But it didn't matter: Sara didn't know what to paint. She was afraid to make a start, so sure was she that she would only ruin another canvas. Her earlier certainty was gone. She stared at the blank white surface and tried without success to visualize something there.

Then, from the other room, Melanie screamed.

It wasn't a play scream, and it didn't end. Melanie was screaming in terror.

Sara went cold with dread and ran

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nto the family room. She saw Melanie owering against a wall while Michael houted and leaped around. At first ara could not make out what was appening. Then she heard the mad luttering of wings and saw a pale blur n the air: a bird had somehow lundered inside and was now flying nadly around the room.

Poor thing, thought Sara. It can't ind the way out again.

Her relief that the crisis was othing more dangerous than a confus-d bird which had blundered into the ouse turned her fear into irritation vith the children. Why were they be-ng so stupid, carrying on so and mak-ng matters worse?

"Calm down!" she shouted. "Just hut up and keep out of the way. You're scaring it."

She gave Michael a firm push and hen opened the door, keeping it open by lodging the iron, dachsund-shaped foot-scraper against it.

"Melanie, be quiet! You're making things worse," Sara said in a loud whisper.

Melanie's screams trailed away into noisy sobs. She was still cowering in a corner, head down and hands protect-ing it.

The bird flew three more times around the room, finally breaking out of that maddened, fluttering pattern to soar smoothly and surely out through the open door. Smiling, Sara gazed after it. Then she turned back to her children.

"Oh, Melanie, what *is* the matter? It was only a bird and it's gone now." Annoyed but obligated, Sara crossed the room to crouch beside her young-est child. "Now, what's this all about?"

Gently she raised Melanie's face away from her hands and the tangle of her hair, and saw that she was covered with blood.

"My God!—oh, sweetheart." Sara hurried the little girl down the hall to the bathroom. So much blood...was her eye hurt? She'd never forgive her-self if....

A wet washcloth, carefully used, revealed no great damage. There were two small cuts, one just above Melanie's left eye and the other on her left cheek. Melanie snuffled and breathed jerkily. She was obviously content to have her her mother fuss over her.

Michael peeked around the door-frame as Sara was applying Band-Aids to Melanie's face. "That bird tried to kill Melanie," he said in a tone of gleeful horror. "He tried to peck her eyes out!"

"Michael, *really*." Sara sighed in exasperation. Melanie would be ner-vous enough about birds without his stories. "It was an accident," she said firmly. "Birds aren't mean or danger-ous — they don't try to hurt people. But that bird was frightened — it was in a strange place. Unfortunately, Melanie got in the way while it was trying to get out. If you'd both been more sensible, instead of jumping around like that—"

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"It flew right at her," Michael said. "I saw it. It tried to get me next but I wouldn't let it — I kept waving my hands around over my head so it couldn't get at my face like it wanted." He sounded very self-important and pleased with himself, which annoyed Sara still more.

"It was an accident. The bird felt trapped and didn't know how to respond. It's not something you have to worry about, because it's not likely ever to happen again. Now I don't want to hear any more about it." She hugged Melanie and lifted her down from the sink ledge. "Feel better?"

"Hungry," Melanie said.

"Glad you mentioned it. Let's go eat lunch."

Monday morning Sara took her children to play with Mary Alice's children. It was a beautiful day but already stiflingly hot. Sara felt lethargic and faintly sad. After Michael and Melanie had joined the other children in the safely fenced-in yard, she lingered to drink ice tea and talk with Mary Alice.

"I hope you got a lot of work done yesterday," Mary Alice said, settling onto a brightly cushioned wicker couch.

Sara shook her head. "Bruce copped out. He called at the last minute and said he couldn't come — he was in Dallas."

Mary Alice's eyes went wide. "That...creep," she said at last.

Sara gave a short laugh. "I've called him worse than that. But I should know by now that he's not to be counted on. The kids are starting to learn that about him, too. The worst thing about it is what I lost — or what I felt I lost. I woke up feeling great — I was ready to conquer the world, or at least to paint it. I felt so *alive*. I felt — I don't know if I can explain how I felt. I think of it as my "creative" feeling, and I haven't had such a strong one since Michael was born — or maybe even since I married Bruce. It's a mood in which everything has meaning, everything is alive, everything is possible."

"There's a girl who sits for us sometimes," Mary Alice said hesitantly. "She's very young, but responsible — she doesn't charge much. You could have her over some afternoons to take care of the kids while you...."

Sara shook her head, discarding the suggestion impatiently. "They'd still be around. They'd still be — oh, calling to me, somehow. I don't know how to explain it. Sometimes I feel I'm just looking for excuses not to paint, but...there's just something about being both a mother *and* an artist. I don't know if I can manage it, not even with all the good examples, and all the babysitters, in the world.

"Art has never been a part-time thing for me. Art was all I cared about in school, and up until I met Bruce. Then the part of me that was an artist got submerged. For the past five years

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've been a full-time mother. Now I'm rying to learn how to be a part-time rtist and a part-time mother, and I lon't think I can. I know that's very ll-or-nothing of me, but it's how I eel."

The two women sat quietly in the right, sunlit room. The high-pitched oices of their children, playing outide, floated up to them.

"Maybe it's just too early," Mary Alice ventured at last. "In the fall, Michael will be in school. You could ut Melanie in a nursery, at least dung the mornings. Then you could ount on having a certain amount of ime to yourself every day."

"Maybe," Sara said. She did not ound hopeful. "But even when the hildren aren't around, the pull is here. I think about them, worry about hem, have to plan for them. And my rt makes as many demands as a child – I can't divide myself between them. don't think it can ever be the same — 'll never have all my energy and houghts and commitment to give to ny art. There are always the children ulling at me." She sighed and rubbed ier face. "Sometimes...I wish I had it o do all over again. And I think that, nuch as I love them, I would never ave chosen to have children. I would ever have married."

Silence fell again, and Sara wondered if she had shocked Mary Alice. She was rousing herself to say something else about her love for her children, to find the words that would modify the wish she had just made, when the clamor of children filled the house, the sound of the kitchen door opening and slamming, the clatter of many feet on hardwood floors, and voices raised, calling.

Sara and Mary Alice both leaped to their feet as the children rushed in.

Melanie and Kelly were both crying; the boys were excited and talking all at once.

"It was the same bird!" Michael cried, tugging at Sara's arm as she knelt to comfort Melanie. "It came and tried to kill us again — it tried to peck her eyes out, but we ran!"

Melanie seemed unhurt; gradually, bathed in her mother's attention, her sobs subsided.

The children all agreed with Michael's story: there had been a white bird which had suddenly swooped down at Melanie, pecking at her head.

"Why does that bird want to hurt us?" Michael asked.

"Oh, Michael, I don't think it does. Maybe you were near its nest; maybe it was attracted by Melanie's hair." Helpless to explain and trying not to feel frightened herself, Sara hugged her daughter.

"Me go home," Melanie muttered into Sara's blouse.

Sara looked up. "Michael, do you want to go home now, or do you want to keep on playing here?"

"You kids can all go play in Barry's room," Mary Alice said.

The other children ran off. Sara

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stood up, still holding Melanie and staggering slightly under her weight. "I'll take this one home," she said. "You can send Michael by himself when he's ready, unless...unless he wants me to come get him."

Mary Alice nodded, her face concerned and puzzled. "What's this about the bird?"

Sara didn't want to talk about it. As lightly as she could she said, "Oh, a bird got trapped in the house yesterday and scared the kids. I don't know what happened in the yard just now, but naturally Michael and Melanie are a little spooked about birds." She set Melanie down. "Come on, sweetie, I'm not going to carry you all the way home."

Keeping her head down as if she feared another attack, Melanie left the house with her mother and walked the half-mile home staying close by her side.

At home, Sara settled Melanie in her room with her dolls, and then, feeling depressed, went back to her own bedroom and stretched out on the bed. She closed her eyes and tried to comfort herself with thoughts of the children in school, a babysitter, a silent house and time to work. It was wrong to blame the children, she thought. She could be painting now — it was her own fault if she didn't.

Thinking about what she would paint next, she visualized a pale, blond woman. Her skin was unnaturally white, suggesting sickness or the pallor of death. Her lips were as red as bloo and her long hair was like silvery co silk.

The White Goddess, thought Sar

The woman drew a veil over h face. Then, slowly, began to draw back. Sara felt a quickening of drea Although she had just seen her fac she was afraid that another, differe face would now be revealed. And th the veil was removed, and she saw t grey face with dead-white, starir eyes.

Sara woke with a start. She felt as she had dozed off for less than minute, but she saw from the bedsi clock that she had been asleep for nea ly an hour. She sat on the edge of t bed and rubbed her eyes. Her mou was dry. She heard voices, one of the Michael's, coming from outside.

She stood up and walked to t window and pulled back the hea drapes, curious to see whom Micha was talking to.

Michael was standing on the ed of the lawn near the driveway with strange woman. Although there w something faintly familiar about he Sara could not identify her as any the neighbors. She was a bras blonde, heavily made-up — even this distance her lips seemed garish red against an unnaturally pale fac Something about the way they stoo together and spoke so intently ma Sara want to intrude.

But by the time she got outsi Michael was alone.

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"Hi," he said, walking toward her.

"Where'd she go?" Sara asked, looking around.

"Who?"

"That woman you were just talking to — who was she?"

"Who?"

"You know who," Sara began, then stopped abruptly, confused. She had just realized why the woman seemed familiar to her — she'd seen her first in a dream. Perhaps she had dreamed the whole incident?

She shook her head, bent to kiss Michael, and went with him into the house.

In the middle of the night Sara started up in bed, wide awake and frightened. The children? She couldn't pinpoint her anxiety, but her automatic reaction was to check on their safety. In the hall, on the way to their rooms, the sound of a muffled giggle reached her and made her turn aside, into the family room. There she saw Michael and Melanie standing before the window, curtains opened wide, gazing into the backyard.

Sara walked slowly towards the window, vaguely dreading what she would see.

There was a white pig on the lawn, almost shining in the moonlight. It stood very still, looking up at them.

Sara put her hand on Melanie's shoulders, and the little girl leaped away, letting out a small scream.

"Melanie!" Sara said sharply.

Both children stood still and quiet, looking at her. There was a wariness in their gaze that Sara did not like. They looked at her as if expecting punishment. What had they done? Sara wondered.

"Both of you, go to bed," Sara said. "You shouldn't be up and roaming around at this hour."

"Look, she's dancing," Michael said softly.

Sara turned and looked out the window. The pig was romping on the lawn in what was surely an unnatural fashion, capering in circles that took it gradually away from the house and toward the lake. It wasn't trotting or running or walking — it was, as Michael had said, dancing.

On the shore of the lake it stopped. To Sara's eyes the figure of the pig seemed to become dim and blurred — she blinked, wondering if a cloud had passed across the moon. The whiteness that had been a pig now seemed to flow and swirl like a dense fog, finally settling in the shape of a tall, pale woman in a silver-white gown.

Sara shivered and rubbed her bare arms with her hands. She wanted to hide. She wanted to turn her gaze away, but she could not move.

It's not possible, she thought. I'm dreaming.

The harsh, unmistakable sound of the bolt being drawn on the back door brought her out of her daze, and she turned in time to see Michael opening the door, Melanie close behind him.

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"No!" She rushed to pull the children away and to push the door shut again. She snapped the bolt to and stood in front of the door, blocking it from the children. She was trembling.

The children began to weep. They stood with their arms half-outstretched as if begging for an embrace from someone just out of their reach.

Sara walked past her weeping children to the window and looked out. There was nothing unusual to be seen in the moonlit yard — no white pig or ghostly woman. Nothing that should not have been there amid the shadows. Across the lake she saw a sudden pale blur, as if a white bird had risen into the air. But that might have been moonlight on the leaves.

"Go back to bed," Sara said wearily. "She's gone — it's all over now."

Watching them shuffle away, sniffing and rubbing their faces, Sara remembered the story she had told Michael on the first night she had caught a glimpse of the woman. It seemed bitterly ironic now, that story of a ghostly mother searching for her children.

"You can't have them," Sara whispered to the empty night. "I'll never let you hurt them."

Sara woke in the morning feeling as if she had been painting all night: tired, yet satisfied and hopeful. The picture was there, just behind her eyes, and she could hardly wait to get started.

The children were quiet and sullen, not talking to her and with only enough energy to stare at the television set. Sara diagnosed it as lack of sleep and thought that it was just as well — she had no time for their questions or games today. She made them breakfast but let the dishes and the other housework go and hurried to set up her paints and canvas outside in the clear morning sunlight.

Another cool nighttime painting, all swirling greys, blues and cold white. A metamorphosis: pale-colored pig transforming into a pale-faced, blue-gowned woman, who shifts into a bird, flying away.

The new creation absorbed her utterly, and she worked all day, with only a brief pause when the children demanded lunch. At a little before six she decided to stop for the day. She was tired, pleased with herself, and utterly ravenous.

She found the children sitting before the television set and wondered if they had been there, just like that, all day. After putting her unfinished painting safely away and cleaning her brushes, she marched decisively to the television set and turned it off.

Michael and Melanie set up a deprived wailing.

"Oh, come on!" Sara said, scoffing. "All that fuss about the news? You've watched enough of this pap for one day. How would you like to go for a swim before dinner?"

Michael shrugged. Melanie hugged

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her knees and muttered, "I want to watch."

"If you want to swim, say so, and I'll go out with you. If you don't, I'm going to start cooking."

They didn't respond. So Sara shrugged and went into the kitchen. She was feeling too good to let herself be annoyed by their moodiness.

The children didn't turn the television set back on, and Sara heard no further sound from the family room until, the chicken broiling and a potato salad under construction, Sara heard the screen door open and close.

She smiled and, as she was going to check on the chicken, paused to look out the window. What she saw froze her with terror.

The children were running toward the lake, silently, their bare arms and legs flashing in the growing twilight. Michael was very much in the lead because Melanie ran clumsily and often fell.

Across the lake on the other shore stood the pale woman in white; on her shoulder, the white bird; and at her side, the pig. The woman raised her head slightly and looked over the children, directly at Sara. Her blood-red lips parted in a gleaming smile.

Sara cried out incoherently and ran for the door. Ahead of her she saw Michael leap into the lake with all his clothes on. She caught up with Melanie on the shore and grabbed her.

"Go back to the house," she said, shaking the girl slightly for emphasis. "Go on back and stay there. You are not to go into the water, understand?"

Then, kicking off her sandals, Sara dived in and swam after Michael.

She had nearly reached him when she heard a splashing behind her, and her courage failed: Melanie. But she couldn't let herself be distracted by her worries about Melanie's ability as a swimmer. She caught hold of her son in a life-saver's neck-grip. He struggled grimly and silently against her, but he didn't have a chance. Sara knew she could get him across to the other shore, if only she didn't have to try to save Melanie as well.

"Michael," Sara gasped. "Honey, listen to me. It's not safe. You must go back. Michael, please? This is very dangerous — she'll kill you. She's the one who sent the bird!"

Michael continued to thrash and kick and choke. Sara wondered if he could hear her at all. She looked around and saw Melanie paddling slowly in their direction. And on the other shore the White Goddess stood, making no sound or motion.

"Michael, please," Sara whispered close to his ear. "Don't fight me. Relax and we'll all be safe." With great difficulty, Sara managed to pull her son back towards the home shore.

Melanie swam with single-minded concentration and was within Sara's grasp before she could try to avoid her. She thrashed about in Sara's armlock, but not as wildly or as strongly as her brother.

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Sara had them both, now, but how was she to swim? She was treading water, just holding her own against the children's struggles and hoping they would soon tire, when she felt a rush of air against her cheek, and Melanie shrieked.

It was the bird again. Sara caught sight of it just as it was diving for Michael's head. The sharp beak gashed his face below one eye. Michael screamed, and the bright blood streamed down his cheek.

Trying to help him, Sara relaxed her stranglehold on Michael. At once he swam away, kicking and plunging below the water.

"Michael, go back to the house — you'll be safe there!"

She swallowed a mouthful of lake water as she spoke and choked on it. Letting go of Melanie, she managed to catch hold of Michael's flailing legs and pull him back close to her. Melanie, trying to avoid the bird which was still flapping around, was screaming and crying and barely keeping herself afloat. Sara had no trouble catching her again.

Shouting at the bird and wishing for a spare hand to strike at it, Sara pulled her children close to her, pressing their faces tightly against her chest. They struggled still to get away, but they were tiring and their struggles grew weaker. Sara knew she would win — she would save them from the bird and from the goddess; she would protect them with her own body.

Finally, the bird flew away. In the sudden calm, Sara realized that her children were much too quiet, much too still. She relaxed her tight hold, and their bodies slipped further into the water.

She stared down at them, slow to understand. Their eyes were open, looking up through a film of water, but they did not see her. She looked up from their sweet, empty faces and across the silver water to where the white-faced figure still stood, her pale eyes staring out at death, her favorite offering.

Sara saw it all as a painting. The pale figure on the shore glowed against the deep blue twilight, and the water gave off its own shimmering light. The woman in the water, also dressed in white, was a terrible, pitiable figure with her two drowned children beside her, their hair floating out around their heads like fuzzy halos; an innocent murderess.

I was the one they were afraid of, thought Sara.

She threw back her head and howled her anguish to the empty world.

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The astronauts who took the U.S. to the moon were a group of hot-shot test pilots with "the right stuff." But they had nothing on Hershey Bigelow, an intrepid mountain climber whose vision of space travel was considerably simpler.

Escape Velocity

BY

MACK REYNOLDS

I met him first at Arnold Glatthard's Swiss Mountain Climbing School at Rosenlaui in the Bernese Oberlands. And even then he had the gleam of dedication in his eye.

For me it was a matter of an article I was doing for one of the magazines back in the States. For the rest of the thirty-odd students it was strictly for fun, all except Hershey Bigelow. I had a feeling almost from the beginning that mountain climbing was a side issue for Hershey Bigelow, a small part of a great whole.

During the first few days in the Klettergarten—which sounds something like kindergarten but is no garden and no place for children—Hershey didn't particularly excel. I'm going to have to stop that. Calling him Hershey, I mean. It is possible for a man to reach such heights that the informality of using his first name is without place. Yes, I know, we Americans will even call James Carter "Jimmy" but remember, Carter is only President.

In the Klettergarten, under Glatthard and his guide-instructors, we learned the basic elements of the Alpinist's art. Beginning with what amounted to little more than playing follow-the-leader over stone formations, we slowly evolved into scrambling up and down rock walls possibly eight or ten feet high. In a couple of days they had grown alarmingly but we caught on fast.

In the evenings we sat around at the Rosenlaui Inn and drank Hubertusbrau Dunkles, listened to the accordian and swapped stories in a half-dozen languages.

Most of our fellow students were Germans, Scandinavians and Dutch. Bigelow and I were the only

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Americans, and willy-nilly we were thrown together. But in spite of sharing a room and eating together at the pension table, in spite of being teamed as we hit the higher slopes, and belaying each other with climbing ropes, I learned little of Hershey Bigelow and his dream at Rosenlaui.

What I did learn was fragmentary. He was about twenty-five and from Kansas, an amateur mathematician and an amateur astronomer, almost an ascetic so far as human appetites are concerned and, above all, a man with an unrevealed dream.

By the end of the first week it was obvious that Hershey Bigelow was Arnold Glatthard's prize student. When we made our assualt on the Kingspitz, to climax our course in studying climbing techniques, it was Bigelow who led, choosing the path of climb, belaying those behind with ropes over the tougher stretches. The Kingspitz is a classic climb, but Hershey Bigelow went up it as though there was a sidewalk the whole of the way.

I dropped out the next day, having the material I needed, but I heard that Bigelow had hired one of the junior guides and was going to attempt the Matterhorn. He was taking his climbing seriously. For the rest of us it had been fun and excitement but not for Hershey Bieglow.

I met him next, to my amazement, in Srinagar, Kashmir, where, by coincidence, I was doing another piece for the same magazine that had sent me to Switzerland. This time my subject was a bit easier: the Vale of Kashmir is considered the most beautiful valley in the world, and my editor wanted to know why.

Bigelow was sitting at a sidewalk cafe, in Srinagar, dressed in what were obviously mountain clothes, although unordinarily cut, and supporting between his knees what I first took to be a rather heavy walking staff.

We went through the usual banalities involving meeting at random a fellow countryman of previous acquaintance and sat down to have a drink of the local fruit sherbet.

Hershey Bigelow, it turned out, was awaiting two Sherpa guides who were to take him on the morrow toward Karakoram Pass and Mount Godwin Austen, better known as K-2. I assume he was to do some climbing on the lower slopes.

When small talk ran out, my eyes dropped to the New Delhi paper he'd spread out on the table before my arrival, and lit upon an item on the progress of the new series of moon landings. He had expressed some interest in the subject at Rosenlaui. So now I indicated the piece and said, "Doing amazingly well, aren't they?"

"No," he said. "They're going about it all wrong. Too complicated, too expensive. They should be doing something much simpler at this stage. The complicated equipment should come much later, when the simpler

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foundations have been laid."

I must have frowned at him.

He explained. "The first voyage across the Atlantic was in a simple overgrown rowboat, manned by Vikings, or storm-blown through accident—not in an ocean liner. The first man to cross America did so on foot. He didn't travel in a jet."

I protested. "Well, fine, but you're not going to walk into space."

He murmered, "Not exactly, of course."

I snorted. "Not exactly, is right."

Hershey Bigelow remained silent for a long moment, then said, very slowly, almost as though to himself, "Accident is always possible, no matter how carefully you have planned for every contingent. And if I fail, perhaps others will wish to follow. But...." He broke off and looked into my eyes. "See here," he said. "I am going to reveal to you a matter thus far unknown to anyone save myself."

His sincerity was manifest. I could only remain spellbound, knowing that at last the secret of Hershey Bigelow was to be known.

"It was Everest I had in mind at first," he said quietly, "but the political red tape involved in getting permission to climb proved insurmountable. I had to settle on K-2, which, as you perhaps know, is less than a thousand feet Everest's junior and is here in India rather than Tibet."

He brought a small map from his pocket and spread it before us. His finger stabbed out at the towering peak. "It hasn't been topped as yet by an individual, but that presents only a minor problem. I am convinced that I can do it."

My eyes must have bugged. "You mean you're going to attempt Mount Godwin Austen alone except for a couple of Sherpas? Be reasonable, man, if you walk into those mountains alone, you'll never walk out again."

"I don't expect to," he said quietly.

I looked at him.

He indicated the heavy walking stick in his hand. "You know what this is?"

On closer scrutiny, it was obviously no walking stick. I shook my head, uncomprehendingly. On one end was a heavy rubber cap, a larger edition of the type usually protecting the tip of a cane. A foot above this was a metal crosspiece, above....

Something dawned on me. A something going back to childhood. "It looks like a pogo-stick," I blurted.

"It' *is* a pogo-stick," he admitted. "The most delicately balanced, strongest springed pogo-stick American science has been able to devise."

Quickly, he sketched out his plan. A notebook, a slide rule, a pocket calculator, log tables appeared beside the map. I found his mathematics beyond my ability to refute.

Starting at the peak of K-2, his first jump would take him ten feet down, the second, utilizing the ultra-strong spring of his superpogo-stick, would

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boost him fifty feet further out and throw him a hundred feet into the air.

My eyes rounded. "Good heavens," I said simply.

"Yes," he said, his eyes gleaming. His finger punched out at the map again. "Here is the third point of contact, and here the fourth. I'll touch here at Penshwar and will make my final contact point at Tatta at the mouth of the Indus river before reaching escape velocity."

"You mean...?"

"Yes, the moon. It must be the moon, so that I can use it as a contact point for the needed momentum to return."

"But, man! There are a thousand problems. Cosmic rays!"

He said, "You'll note my suit. Made entirely of orlon, dacron and asbestos cloth. I feel confident of protection."

"But the trip would take days!"

"I have Spam sandwiches in plenty."

"But oxygen?"

"I have my SCUBA skin-diving rig, with spare compressed air containers. I believe," he said with satisfaction, "I have anticipated every contingency."

I was aghast. "But how could you ever return to Earth? When you hit...."

He shook his head and demonstrated. "Here I have this knob on the end of my stick with which I can release some of the tension of the spring. As I return for the first contact with Earth, I'll release the spring a touch. The rebound will be that much the less. As I come down for the second contact, I'll release still more tension. Slowly, I'll break down the acceleration and height of jump until finally I'll wind up on the ballpark behind my house in Topeka."

"Topeka?" I said. "Good heavens." The full magnitude of his scheme overwhelmed me.

"Topeka," he said firmly.

("The Autopsy" from page 37)

sighed with relief and laid his scalpel down. Even as he did so, he felt the deep, inward prickle of an alien energy—something that flared, crackled, flared, *groped for* but did not quite find its purchase. And inwardly, as the doctor sank towards sleep—cerebrally, as a voiceless man must speak—he spoke to the parasite these carefully chosen words:

"Welcome to your new house. I'm afraid there's been some vandalism—the lights don't work, and the plumbing has a very bad leak. There are some other things wrong as well—the neighborhood is perhaps a little *too* quiet, and you may find it hard to get around very easily. But it's been a lovely home to me for fifty-seven years, and somehow I think you'll stay...."

The face, turned towards the body of Joe Allen, seemed to weep scarlet tears, but its last movement before death was to smile.

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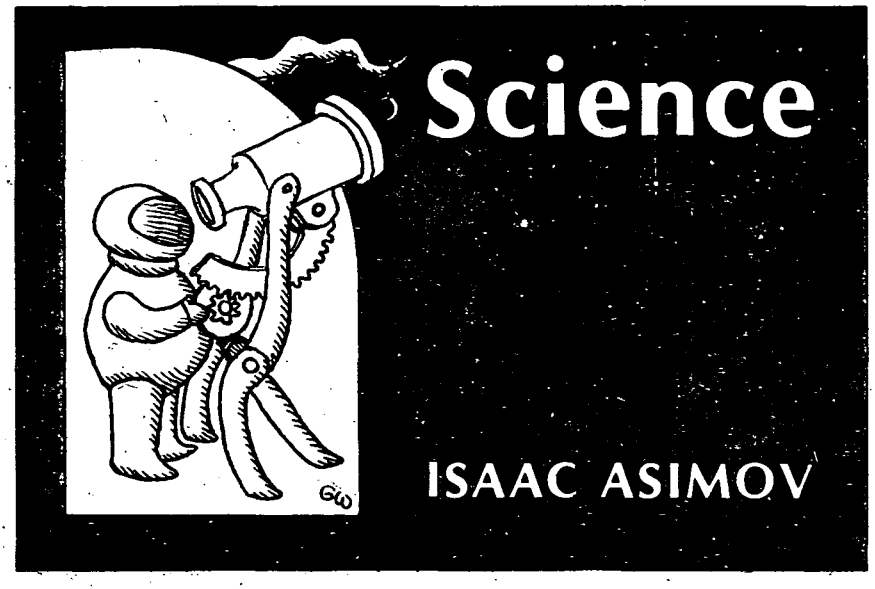

BEYOND EARTH'S EONS

When I was getting my education, I scorned commencements. I refused to attend them on the occasion when I earned my Bachelor's degree, or my Master's, but insisted the school mail me my diplomas. For my Ph.D., I broke down to the extent of attending the commencement, but I sat in the audience, refusing to go through the mummery of academic regalia.

I am well paid for that now. Since 1969, no commencement season has passed without my having been forced to climb into cap and gown at least once. In 1976 I had to do it no less than four times. Almost always this is for the purpose of giving a commencement address, and on a number of occasions for the purpose of garnering an honorary degree as well.

As a result I have collected through 1979, four or five doctorates in science, one in engineering, one in letters, and one in humane letters.

Then came May 18, 1980, when I showed up at Boston University's commencement in order to collect another honorary degree. It was a happy occasion, for I am on the B.U. faculty as Professor of Biochemistry. I met some old friends and was made much of.

I did not know exactly which degree I would be awarded, but it didn't

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seem to make much difference. I had been granted one in every category for which there was the shadow of an excuse, so I expected nothing new.

Boston University fooled me. After some considerable discussion (I understand) as to whether it made more sense to give me a doctorate in letters or in science, President John Silber decided to do both, and he made me a "Doctor of Letters and Science." Such a double degree was unprecedented for B.U. and (for all I know) may be unprecedented for higher institutions of learning generally.

I am not ordinarily sentimental about such things and have never framed any piece of academic parchment except for my Ph.D. diploma, but I am going to frame this new diploma and hang it on the wall.

And the reason I'm telling you this is that of all the writing I do, the one item I produce that seems to me to call upon my scientific knowledge and my writing ability in precisely equal measure is this long-continued essay-series for F&SF, of which this particular essay is the 266th.

In selecting a double degree to honor these two facets of talent, then, it seems to me that Boston University, whether it knew it or not, was honoring this series, and I am so proud of that, that I can't help temporarily discarding the modesty for which I am so famous in order to tell you about it.

And now that I have, I will turn to a subject that is going to stretch my letters *and* science to the limit. I hope I make it.

Last month, we discussed the age of the Earth and came to a satisfactory figure of 4.6 eons, where we defined an eon as 1,000,000,000 (one billion) years. We pass on, now, to the question of the age of the Universe generally.

Until the 18th Century, there was no feeling anywhere that the two questions—the age of the Earth and the age of the Universe—were separate. It was always assumed, before the days of modern astronomy, that the heavenly bodies were a minor adjunct of the Earth. The Bible says, "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth," and if other religions and philosophies didn't use those words, they had the concept — that everything was created at once.

In the 18th Century, when scientists began to speculate about a non-divine creation of the Solar system, either through some catastrophic event involving the Sun, or through the evolutionary condensation of a vast mass of dust and gas, it seemed reasonable to suppose that this was a local phenomenon. The Sun, in the catastrophic case, might well have existed for an indefinite period before the birth of the Earth, along with its millions

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of companion stars. The mass of dust and gas, in the evolutionary case, might well have existed for an indefinite period before the birth of the Solar system, and other stars and their planetary systems might already have formed eons before.

In either case, the Universe was surely older than the Solar system, possibly very much older. In fact, if one could get away from the notion of a divine creation (not an easy thing to do in the 18th and 19th Century) the Universe might even be infinitely old.

In last month's essay, I pointed out that the advancement of the law of conservation of energy in the 1840s made it clear that the Sun must have begun with some fixed store of energy which would someday be used up. In short, as an energy-radiating body, it had to have a beginning and an end.

The law of conservation of energy did not, in itself, imply the same for the Universe as a whole. Individual stars might eventually consume their energy source, but new stars might form, and this might continue indefinitely.

Why not? The law of conservation of energy (also called "the first law of thermodynamics") held that energy could never be created nor destroyed, but could only be transferred from one place to another or changed from one form to another. The Sun, in using up its energy, merely transferred that energy from itself into surrounding space, and other stars did the same. Might not the energy flooding into space come together to form as many new stars as had previously died and continue to do so forever?

This dream was ended by a German physicist, Rudolf J.E. Clausius (1822-1888). In 1850, he discovered that if one considered the ratio of the heat content to the absolute temperature of a closed system (one that lost no energy to the outside world and gained no energy from it) that ratio always increased in the course of any spontaneous change taking place within that closed system.

Clausius named the ratio "entropy" so one could say that in any closed system, all spontaneous changes involved an increase of entropy and this came to be called "the second law of thermodynamics."

The Universe as a whole is, as far as we know, a closed system; in fact, the only truly closed system. Therefore we can say that the entropy of the Universe is constantly increasing.

We don't know, off-hand, how high the increase can go, but suppose we look at matters in reverse. If the entropy of the Universe is constantly

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increasing, the total entropy of the Universe was less last year than it is now and still less the year before and even less the year before that.

If we assume that the total entropy right now is finite, then if we move back in time far enough, we will find ourselves with an entropy of zero. It would seem that we can't move backward further than that so that if the second law of thermodynamics is true (and every observation we have made in over a century and a quarter since Clausius' time leads us to believe it is) then the Universe had to have a beginning.

It turns out that entropy is a measure of the unavailability of energy. Energy can be turned from one form into another, but not with perfect efficiency. Every transformation leaves less of the total energy available for conversion into work. While the total energy of the Universe remains constant with time, less and less of it is available for conversion into work as time goes on.

Eventually, all the energy, if we assume a finite amount, becomes unavailable. At that time, all the energy is in the form of heat spread out evenly with no temperature differences. Under such conditions, entropy is at a maximum, and available energy is zero. While we can still speak of a Universe, for the energy is still all there, it is a Universe without any further possibility of change—life—us. To all practical purposes, the Universe is dead, and, indeed, Clausius spoke of "the heat-death of the Universe."

To summarize: Given the second law of thermodynamics and a finite Universe, we can deduce from that alone that the Universe must have had a beginning and must someday have an ending.

We cannot, from the second law of thermodynamics alone, decide *when* the beginning was, or *when* the ending will be. That depends on the total energy-content of the Universe and the rate at which entropy is increasing, and Clausius couldn't even begin to guess at those figures.

Of course, we don't have to know all the details of energy content and rate of entropy increase. Suppose we find some change taking place in the Universe, a change so vast, so steady, so unidirectional, that we can assume the entropy increase with respect to that change utterly swamps all other lesser entropy increases. We can then pretend that that one change is all that is taking place and work with that. Everything else merely introduces insignificant modifications that don't perceptibly affect the final answer.

The chance of finding such a change would surely have seemed tremendously small and yet it is there and it was found.

The possibility of the discovery dates back to the 1840s when it was

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shown that from the radiation given off by a moving object one could tell whether that object were approaching us or receding from us and at what velocity it was doing so (see PLAYING THE GAME, May 1970).

Beginning in 1912, the technique was applied to the light spectra of certain "nebulas" in the sky which were thought to be clouds of dust and gas not terribly far away. They turned out, however, to be very distant objects.

The stars visible to us with the unaided eye are part of an enormous structure called the Galaxy, made up of several hundred billion stars, but beyond the Galaxy are other galaxies, some as enormous as our own and some more enormous still. These outer galaxies stretch through vast distances and the "nebulas" proved to be these distant galaxies.

The American astronomer Edwin Powell Hubble (1889-1953) first clearly demonstrated this when, in 1917, he used the then-new 100-inch telescope at Mt. Wilson in California to take photographs of the rim of the Andromeda "nebula" (the only one visible to the unaided eye) and found the cloudy luminosity to be the result of enormous numbers of very faint stars.

By the time Hubble accomplished this task, it had been shown that all the galaxies studied (except for one or two of the nearest) were receding from us and some were doing so at surprisingly large velocities (see THE DISTANCE OF FAR, June 1970).

Hubble grew interested in this. He collected all the data available on the speed of recession of the various galaxies and pressed for more and more observations of this sort. He correlated the speed of recessions with the relative distance of the galaxies (using various methods to determine those relative distances) and it became plain that there was a simple linear relationship. The farther a galaxy was, the faster it receded from us. If Galaxy 1 were 5 times as far from us as Galaxy 2, then Galaxy 1 was receding at 5 times the velocity that Galaxy 2 did.

By 1929, Hubble felt it safe to announce the relationship, which has been called "Hubble's law" ever since.

It may seem very peculiar to have all the galaxies receding from us as though they were repelled by us, with the force of repulsion increasing with distance. Actually, though, that is the wrong way to look at it. A more sensible interpretation of Hubble's law is to suppose the entire Universe is expanding. If we suppose this, then from the viewpoint of an observer on *any* galaxy and not only our own, the distant galaxies would be receding at a rate proportional to their distance.

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Such an expanding Universe is consistent with the equations worked out by Albert Einstein (1879-1955) in 1916 in his General Theory of Relativity.

The vast expansion of the Universe is so enormous a phenomenon that we can work with it alone to consider the beginning and ending of the Universe, and assume that it will give us the same answer we would have gotten by working with the second law of thermodynamics in full detail.

For instance, the steady expansion of the Universe means that last year it was smaller than this year, and the year before smaller still and so on, until at some time in the long distant past it was no larger than a point. It was at that past moment of time that entropy was zero. The Universe began at that moment in a "big bang" which resulted in an explosive expansion.

Let us pretend now that we are dealing with a galaxy that is 13,000,000 light-years from us and that is receding from us at a speed of 2,000 kilometers per second. If we imagine time moving backward, then the galaxy is approaching us and, every second, is 2,000 kilometers closer to us than it was before.

Since there are 31,557,000 seconds in a year, that means that the galaxy is roughly 63,000,000,000 kilometers closer to us every year we move backward in time. A light-year is equal to 9,460,000,000,000 kilometers, so that we would have to move backward in time some 150 years before the galaxy would shave a single light-year off its distance.

To have the galaxy move 13,000,000 light-years we would have to move back in time 150x13,000,000, or roughly 2,000,000,000 years; that is, two eons. In other words, two eons ago, that galaxy and ours occupied the same place.

What holds for that galaxy would hold for any galaxy if Hubble's law is correct. If galaxy 1 is twice as far as galaxy 2, galaxy 1 is moving twice as fast so that both will cover the distance by which they are separated from us in the same time. You can argue it out similarly for all the galaxies.

In short, if Hubble's law holds, then all the galaxies will coalesce at the same time if we imagine time moving backward. To calculate that time it is only necessary to choose one distant galaxy and work out both its distance and its velocity of recession. Divide the former by the latter and you will find the time that has elapsed since the big bang and thus you will have determined the age of the Universe.

There's no doubt about the velocity of any galaxy whose spectrum can be studied. How the velocity affects the dark spectral lines is completely

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understood, and it can be checked by observations in the laboratory.

That leaves distance, and there, unfortunately, we are dealing with something not at all easy to determine. When the 20th Century began it was not possible to determine distances of more than 100 light-years with any degree of reliability.

In 1912 it was discovered, however, that certain variable stars called "Cepheids" had periods that varied with their actual luminosity. The period of light fluctuation was easily measured and from that the luminosity of each Cepheid could be calculated. If the apparent brightness is compared to the luminosity, the difference must be due to the light-diluting effect of distance. In this way, the distance of that Cepheid or of any structure of which the Cepheid forms a part can be determined.

When Hubble first worked out his law, he determined the distances of some of the nearer galaxies by detecting Cepheids in their outskirts. Those Cepheids were much fainter in appearance than Cepheids of the same period in our own Galaxy. Since they had the same period they must actually be of equal luminosity. The extreme faintness of the Cepheids in the outer galaxies must be the result of their great distance and Hubble worked out those distances.

Once he had done so, he divided distance by velocity and decided (as I did a little earlier in the essay) that the Universe was two eons old.

This was a horrible shock for geologists and physicists. Based on the study of uranium and lead in the rocks (as I explained last month) they were convinced that the Earth was considerably older than two eons. Surely, it was inconceivable that the Universe was younger than the Earth.

In 1942, fortunately, the German-American astronomer Walter Baade (1893-1960) found reason to believe one should divide stars into two classes: Population I and Population II (see THE FLICKERING YARDSTICK, March 1960). He was able to show that for a given period of light fluctuation, Cepheids varied in luminosity depending on whether they were Population I or Population II, with the former being considerably more luminous for a given period.

In studying the outer galaxies, Hubble had been observing Population I Cepheids and had applied to them the rules for Population II Cepheids. Thinking those distant Cepheids were less luminous than they really were, he ended with moderate distances for the galaxies. Once the Cepheids were recognized for the much more luminous Population I variety, the galaxies were seen to be far more distant than Hubble had thought, if that vast luminosity were to be reduced to the observed tiny spark.

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Applying Baade's insight, it was seen that the greater distances divided by the same old velocity (which there was no reason to change) gave a correspondingly greater quotient so that the time of the big bang had to be placed farther into the past and the Universe was seen to be far older than two eons and, indeed, far older than the 4.6-eon age of the Earth. Geologists and physicists heaved sighs of relief.

For thirty years after Baade's work, every time astonomers discovered new ways of determining the distances of the galaxies, the figures seemed to be larger than had previously been thought and the Universe, therefore, older.

By 1979, the distances were roughly ten times what Hubble had thought at first and the age of the Universe was thought to be (by a straightforward application of Hubble's law) 20 eons old.

A straightforward application, however, is over-simple.

The Universe is expanding against the gravitational pull of all its parts. The task of overcoming that pull deprives the galaxies of kinetic energy and, in their expansive outward rush, they move more and more slowly with time (just as a ball moving upward against the pull of Earth's gravity, moves upward more and more slowly with time).

This means that if we imagine ourselves going backward in time, we will see the galaxies approaching each other more and more rapidly, and they will coalesce in less time than the 20 eons arrived at by supposing their speed of recession is constant throughout.

How much less than 20 eons the age of the Universe is depends on how strong the Universe's gravitational pull is. That, in turn, depends on what the average density of the matter of the Universe is. The denser the Universe is on the average, the stronger its gravitational pull, the shorter the time since the big bang and the younger the Universe.

Unfortunately, we're not sure about the density of the Universe so we can't make any hard and fast deductions. All we can say is that 20 eons would seem to be the maximum age of the Universe and if it is, on the whole, not very dense, then the actual age may not be much below that.

In that case, the Solar system is just about one-fourth as old as the Universe is. To put it another way, the Universe existed (and did very well, I'm sure) for three times as long without the Sun and the Earth as it did with them.

Once we determine the age of the Universe, we have automatically determined the size of the Universe. At the moment of the big bang, electromagnetic radiation such as light began to speed outward in all directions—at the speed of light, of course.

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The expanding globe of radiation moved outward 1 light-year for each year of time that passed and 1 light-eon (a billion light-years) for each eon of time that passed. When Hubble thought the Universe was two eons old, it would have had to be 2,000,000,000 light-years in radius and, of course, 4,000,000,000 light-years in diameter.

As astronomer's estimates of the age of the Universe increased, so did its estimated size. If the age is 20 eons, the radius is 20,000,000,000 light-years and the diameter 40,000,000,000.

The figures for the age and size of the Universe are by no means hard and fast, however. The measurements used are highly ingenious but they are pretty close to the borderline in accuracy. Instruments must be used close to their limits and reasoning must rest on possibly shaky assumptions. It would not therefore be surprising, if further observations resulted in further alterations of the distance to the far galaxies—and therefore of the age and size of the Universe.

In late 1979, three American astronomers, Marc Aaronson, John Huchra and Jeremy Mould made use of some new techniques for determining galactic distances.

For one thing, they studied the globular clusters which are associated with galaxies, including our own. These clusters are comparatively dense spherical accumulations of anywhere from 10,000 to 1,000,000 stars. Each galaxy possesses one or two hundred of them in a wide range of luminosity.

You can't tell much by comparing one distant galactic globular cluster with another that is attached to a different galaxy, because the two may be of different sizes. The three astronomers, however, noted that in various galaxies of the Virgo galactic cluster, the *range* of brightness was about the same for all.

It might be that the range was always the same for all galaxies, including our own. By comparing the apparent brightness of the range of globular clusters of a distant galaxy with that of the range of globular clusters of our own Galaxy, we can calculate the distance required to reduce the brightness of the former to the dim sparks acutally observed.

Then again, the three astronomers measured the rate at which distant galaxies were rotating. This can be done if the galaxies happen to be viewed edge-on from Earth. If the spectrum is taken first at one end, then the other, there will be a red-shift in one case and a blue-shift in the other and from the size of those shifts the rotation period can be determined.

The faster a galaxy is rotating at its edges, the more massive it must be, for it is the mass that produces the gravitational field that whips along the

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movement of the stars. Once the mass is determined, the actual luminosity is also known. If this luminosity is compared with the actual brightness we see, an estimate of the distance of the galaxy can be made. What's more, the three astronomers measured the brightness in the infra-red, which is much less likely to be scattered by dust and thus dimmed across the vast distances than visible light is.

Using these methods, the three astronomers presented evidence to the effect that previous distance figures rather overstated the case and that actually, the distances of the galaxies ought to be cut in half.

If they are correct, it means that the Universe is only 10 eons old and is only 20,000,000,000 light-years in diameter. It would also mean that the Solar system was about half the age of the Universe.

When this was first announced, there was considerable excitement among some non-astronomers. At least I got calls from reporters whose questions to me made it seem they thought that the world of science had been turned upside down and that astronomy had been exposed as a rickety science because "all of a sudden half the Universe had disappeared."

The things to remember in this connection are:

1 - We are dealing, as I have explained, with very borderline measurements.

2 - The Universe has, in 30 years, been expanded ten-fold in radius, from two eons to twenty eons, as astronomers sharpened their observations so that being pushed back to ten eons (a two-fold reduction) is a comparatively minor adjustment.

3 - The returns aren't all in yet. The longer age seemed to fit not only the distance-measurements but the time required for certain facets of stellar evolution. The reduced figure of ten eons may not leave quite enough time for these facets — which makes many astronomers reluctant to accept the new figure.

So we'll see. Undoubtedly many astronomers are now checking the new work and are going over the older work, and we shall continue to sharpen the manner in which the eons are being counted, to the good of everyone.

And there's more, too. In this essay, I have taken a backward look at the Universe, one that glanced down the line of eons to its birth. What about the forward look, up the eons to its death. We'll take that up next month.

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Coleman Brax wrote "Superflare," January 1980. His second F&SF story concerns a most unusual performing artist and her "adorner," who are called to give a recital at the White House.

Getting Into Synch

BY

COLEMAN BRAX

Stelpart was awakened by an insistent run of chimes. It was a favorite composition, but the melody gave him no pleasure on this day. There were only three people who had the key to the comm block he'd erected before going to sleep. He had assured himself that none of the three would be calling him.

"Pete, I'm sorry," said a voice from above the bed. "Believe me, I know what today is." It was Tadlo and he certainly did know. Stelpart always sent out his schedules six months in advance. That was the advantage of being a Klabber.

"Look, Pete, I wouldn't be calling if it wasn't an emergency." Tadlo's shaggy black hair and bushy eyebrows shimmered on the ceiling. The channel must have been bad; now and again his eyebrows would roll to the top of the frame and reappear at the bottom, then snap back into the normal position. "I can't believe it, Pete, I've got a lulu on my hands."

Stelpart, still on his back, remained sprawled on the bed. He rubbed his legs against the encompassing warmth of the sheets. "Tad, I'm planning on staying right here for the next twelve hours. Why don't you call someone else?" Stelpart felt that he really wasn't awake yet. What he wanted most was for Tadlo to leave him alone. Maybe he'd be able to fall asleep again.

"Pete, Pete. Listen to me. It's the *President*. Laura's giving a recital for the President *tonight*. There's no one else to call. Rodanz is on an island somewhere and Jackson's busy. If it wasn't for the President, I wouldn't ask you, Pete."

Stelpart wasn't sure he hadn't miss-

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ed something. "What is this, Tad, no advance notice? You should have planned this...."

Tadlo's eyebrows bounced towards each other in nervous attraction. "I know. I know. They called me this morning. Why do you think I'm going bananas? The President's got unexpected company. Emperors or something. Last minute plans."

"So they called you. Lots of luck." Stelpart worked the back of his head deeper into the pillow.

"Lots of luck? Is that all you can say? How could I turn this down, Pete boy? You think Laura's going to get another crack at the White House?"

"Laura's a great girl and she's got absolute talent," Stelpart replied. "She's going to make it with or without the White House.... Of course, *with* would be better than without." He could still see her as she had been in London. Her quicksilver body on the stage. Her wool-stockinged feet in the hotel room. They had been together a week that time.

"Pete, don't say no. Get up. Have some breakfast ... uh, lunch. See how you feel."

Stelpart looked at his watch. Lunch? He didn't realize he'd slept that late. But he didn't regret it. It was a safe way to pass time.

"I don't know," he answered, thinking of Laura again. "I really don't know."

"Can I call you in an hour, Pete?"

"Okay. Yeah." He didn't see how an hour would make any difference, but he wanted to get rid of Tadlo. "Call me."

Tadlo's face vanished. Stelpart stared at the blank ceiling for a while. Then he touched a button on his wrist-meter and held it up so he could read the face. Green sinusoids flashed by, showing him exactly what he expected to see. His E-components were low, mostly at their nadirs. Three of his P-components were at critical zero crossings.

That meant he'd be a disagreeable son-of-a-gun for the rest of the day. But worse, he'd be accident-prone — likely to slip off a walkway or catch an arm in a sliding door. Three P's critical! He couldn't recall when he'd last been in such a precarious state.

He turned his thoughts back to Tadlo. He owed Tadlo a favor, but Laura's welfare was his chief concern. Laura. He preferred to think of her in her natural state — a child-mouthed girl with a firm chin that told people she got what she wanted. Her hair was short, black and curly; her figure was trim, almost boyish. She had plenty of talent; what she lacked was glamor. That's why she needed Stelpart.

In London they had talked about going on tour together, maybe even to the O'Neill colonies. They had laughed about the fact that the British still couldn't heat their hotels properly, had used that as an excuse to linger under the covers. He dubbed her Miss Stocking-foot then, after the foot warmers

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she always wore in bed.

They had been together a few times since London, but the moment for a commitment between them had somehow not yet arrived. He wasn't sure he wanted her to see him in his current state. He certainly didn't want to produce inferior art for her.

He slid his legs to the floor and raised his lanky frame carefully. There was no point in risking a sprained ankle today. On days like this it was best not to get out of bed at all.

Across the room sat his recreation control pad — a white tablet with square black keys in front of a small flat screen. He walked to the console and lowered himself gently into the chair. There were some simple experiments he could use to test himself. Reaction time seemed like a good parameter to measure. He punched for the program, then spent a minute trying to follow with his finger a moving spot on the screen. Score: 4.2 out of 10. Unsafe driver. No surprise there, with his Physical components crossing their zeros.

He wondered about the significance of his Emotional vector. Two components at dead bottom together. He punched for the directory to the Modern's painting collection and looked at the listing under Mondrian's name. No, not Mondrian. Something flashier ... Ventano. He tapped the sequence that projected the "Passage through the Nebula" onto the far wall at full scale. He stared at the recreation of the famed canvas for about thirty seconds. Yes, the pull was still there. He could feel himself falling in, like an asteroid under the influence of a heavy star.

He felt ready to make a decision. Perhaps he'd be disagreeable to be with, but at least he could still feel. If he could feel, he could work. He just had to keep from breaking a leg somewhere between his cube and the White House.

Tadlo didn't even give him the full hour. He called again just as Stelpart was finishing a late lunch. "What do you say, Pete boy? I see you got yourself dressed. You look fine, it you ask me."

"I'm grouchy as hell," Stelpart retored to the small image in the kitchen wall. "But I may do it after all. Are you springing for a cab?"

"From the airport? Of course."

"From here."

Tadlo bit his lip. "From your place?" His pause was just long enough to make Stelpart feel guilty for asking. "Sure, Pete. I'll send one prepaid. At 3 sharp."

"Okay."

"And she's doing the same routine she did last month in K.C. Do you have it?"

"I'll find it."

"Good luck, Pete. And thanks."

Stelpart left his cube at 2:55 and took the lift to the roof. He could hear

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several choppers in the air, could see one nearly overhead. He didn't know if any of them were for him. For the first time in his life, he decided to wait in the crashproof shelter. It was foolish to think that trouble went hunting the weak, but he did it anyway. The cab was two minutes late.

The pilot was a slightly plump blonde, garbed to show plenty of skin. She had the kind of long legs you'd like to see on the stage; a few months of dieting and exercise were all she needed in that department. It was too bad about her face, Stelpart thought: big nose, big chin, hair completely wrong. She needed a cosmo, but probably couldn't afford one.

"Got a prepay for Tadlo Talent Agency. Pickup Mr. Stelpart. Destination D.C." She looked at him with curiosity. "You Stelpart?"

He nodded.

She stared at her clipboard. "Didn't say where in D.C."

"White House, pad four."

She grinned and primped her sagging beehive of hair. "No kiddin'?" Then she turned serious for a moment. "Hey, you're on the level, right? I don't wanna get shot down in this thing."

"Nothing to worry about." A presidential aide had called him shortly after he'd finished with Tadlo. In a momentary panic, Stelpart fumbled in his pocket for the sheet on which he'd written the password. It was still there. "I'll tell you what to say when the time comes."

"Okay, Mr. Stelpart. Park that under you if you want." She pointed to his toolkit, a bulky rectangular case suspended from his right hand.

Stelpart stepped inside the six-passenger craft. He chose the seat directly behind the pilot, where he could have a partial view of the instrument panel. He slid his case under, then clicked the belts around his middle. By the time he finished, the cab was rising.

"A lot going on over there today," she said.

"Over where?"

"At the White House. High-level talks and all that."

He couldn't recall anything. "I haven't been listening to the news."

"You should have seen them on the A.M. 'cast. Emperors, they call themselves. The Emperor of South Africa. The Emperor of West Africa. Some titles!"

"Yeah." Stelpart wasn't up to worrying about presidential problems with world trade. He's have to direct what energies he had towards preparing Laura.

"And there's a banquet tonight," the girl continued. "Entertainment. The works."

"Yeah."

"Say, you aren't part of that are you? Wasn't there something about a talent agency on the tab?" She turned around to take another look at him.

Stelpart grinned. "Did you ever hear of Laura Pond?"

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"Who?"

"Laura Pond. She won an Olympic silver medal ... about eight years ago. Gymnastics."

"I don't know."

"She was a teen-ager then. Now she's a gymnastic dancer."

"Like what's her name? The one with all the rhinestones?"

"That's right. But I think Laura's even better."

The blonde seemed to be more interested in Stelpart's conversation than in watching where she was flying. A warning buzzer went off over her head. "Damn." She adjusted her course to keep a proper distance from the chopper ahead of them. "Now what were you saying? Are you this girl's manager or something?"

"Adorner." Stelpart took his sketchpad out of a pocket on his kit. He flipped it open to the page he'd been working on, leaned forward, and showed it to her.

"Not bad. Not bad. Those emperors are going to go home googly-eyed."

He smiled. "I hope so. This is supposed to be my day off."

"Day off?" She paused to listen to something in her earphone. "Hold on folks, elevator going up." She twisted the control and they started to ascend to a higher corridor.

Stelpart looked out the window; there was nothing to see but grey haze. "Where are we, do you know?"

"Over Hoboken most likely." She paused again to listen. "Okay. We stay at this altitude till Baltimore."

"That's fine. I'd just as soon keep my lunch down."

"What were you saying about your day off? You're a Klabber I'll bet. Just like all the show folks."

"Sure I am. You should be one too."

She tossed her head. "Me? I don't need that. I can tell when I'm gonna have a wrong day as soon as I wake up. I call in sick, you bet'cha. Never had a crackup yet."

"I'm afraid I couldn't get away with your life-style," he laughed. "I may have appointments six months in advance. ... I've got to know ahead of time when my down days will be."

"Maybe so..." She sounded unconvinced.

"And when people have to work together, it gets even tougher. If they're out of phase with each other ... tensions develop. Give them time and the whole show blows up."

"Okay. But to have one of those *things* inside you. I mean ... doesn't it make you feel like some kind of — well, some kind of machine?"

Stelpart laughed again. "Everyone has the same supradian rhythms."

"Super what?"

"Supradian. Cycles that last longer than a day. They're just cycles of hormone levels and the like. Everyone has them, but in most people they're not perfectly regular."

"Nobody's perfect." The blonde, as

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if that comment jogged her memory, made a quick survey of her instrument panel.

"But with the Klab regulator, my cycles are exact," he continued. "Exact, therefore predictable. That's the whole point."

She shrugged. "I think I'll take my chances with Ma Nature, imperfect as she is."

"Well..." he added. "We Klabbers are always trying to convert people. Don't say I didn't try." He started to sketch again on his pad. Then he took out a color pencil and filled in some of the shaded areas.

He was still doodling on his pad when the girl told him to look out the window. He could see the Washington Monument to his left; the White House, surrounded by its double fence, lay straight ahead. A pair of antiaircraft guns on the lawn seemed to be aimed directly at them.

"They want to know what the temperature up here is," she said, pointing to her earphone. "I don't have a meter."

"Tell them it's..." He pulled out the crumpled sheet of paper. "Ninety-two Fahrenheit, fifteen Celsius."

"If you say so." She repeated his words into the throat mike. "I guess they liked that," she grinned. "They're taking us down."

They descended towards a large white "4" that turned out to be an arrangement of white stones in the lawn to the side of the pad. A number of sharp-looking soldiers in neat khaki watched as the door of the cab opened. Several fingered automatic weapons.

"Thanks for the lift," Stelpart said as they landed with a jolt. He tore off a page from his sketchpad and handed it to her. It showed his notion of how she should have her hair done to best highlight her face.

She lit up when she saw it. "Any time, doll. Any time."

He picked up his kit and headed for the door.

"Watch your head," she warned.

He ducked in time to avoid scalping himself, but as he stepped out, his left shoe didn't clear. The heel snagged for an instant. He lost his balance and tumbled towards the asphalt.

"Watch it, buddy," someone said. One of the soldiers caught him about halfway down. "Take it easy, fella. You've got plenty of time."

Slightly dazed, Stelpart regained his footing and then looked over at the case he'd dropped. Spray pens and paint tubes were scattered about the pad.

"Are you all right, Mr. Stelpart?" The blonde had her head out the door of the chopper.

"Fine. Fine. Have a good flight back." He bent down and picked up his belongings. He moved slowly, as if trying to make up for his recent carelessness.

As soon as he got his kit together, they took it away from him. A pair of officers in blue caps searched it for

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who-knows-what. Then they took him into an elevator. The white buttons were unmarked and the door had no window. He could only guess at the number of floors they were descending.

They took him down a silent, white-walled hallway to the room where Laura was waiting. When she came to the door, her face was flushed. "I've been limbering up," she explained. Her thin nose seemed redder than the rest. She was wearing a blue leotard and her pink-enameled "good luck" earrings. Stelpart thanked the officers and stepped into the room.

As soon as the door slid shut, she gave him an enthusiastic hug.

"Careful, Laura. I'm dangerous," he said with a grin. "I almost fell on my teeth out there. It could be contagious."

"I don't think so." She stood on her toes and gave him a peck on the chin. Her kinky hair dusted his neck as she eased down. "You're an ace to come, Pete. You really are."

"Maybe more ass than ace. I'll be lucky to get home intact." He picked her up for a quick nuzzle, nearly dropped her. "See what I mean?"

"Come on, Pete. How bad off are you?" She reached for his wristmeter. He liked the feel of her fingers against his skin. He liked her aroma of rose oil.

"Now do you believe?" he asked, as she watched the sequence of sinusoids.

"You know what, Pete?" She looked up at him with great seriousness. "I don't think I'd have done the same for you."

"No kidding? And let's see what *you've* got going...."

He picked up her wrist in turn. He whistled as the display flipped through its sequence. "Not bad at all." There was nothing critical in any of her vectors; most of the curves were solidly plus.

"One thing's for sure." He grinned. "At this moment, you and I are grossly unfit to be working together."

"We'll have to do it anyway," she said.

He gave her hand a squeeze. It really felt good to be with her again. He would have liked a more intimate greeting before starting work, but there just wasn't time.

"Okay now. How are we supposed to get anything done in this place?" He took a quick survey of the room, which seemed to have been designed to be an office. A chrome desk, pushed into a corner, had been piled with Laura's cases. There was a pseudo-window on one wall that was set to a summer view of the White House lawn. Another wall held a floor-to-ceiling mirror. "We need better lighting," he grumbled.

"There's a control somewhere. Try near the door." Laura launched into a backbend to the floor while Stelpart hunted for the knobs. He turned the intensity to MAX and the spectral mix to DAY. Wall panels and ceiling respond-

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ed to produce a uniform illumination.

"Great. Now all we need is a stool."

Laura, back fully arched and head upside-down, directed him to a low plastic table next to the desk. "Best they could find," she said. "It looks flimsy, but I don't weigh all that much."

"I guess it'll do. This setup is not exactly professional. I thought they had real dressing rooms here."

"So did I. They've got a lot of people in today. I guess the others got the dressing rooms."

"Okay. We'll make do. Go put your pants on."

"Which ones?"

"Gold. I guess you should look at this." He took out his sketchpad and showed her what he'd planned.

She nodded. "I like." Then she skipped over to the desk. "Turn around," she said impishly.

He smiled and began to busy himself with his toolkit. He took out the spraypens and laid them on an empty book shelf. Then, one by one, he loaded them with the cartridges he'd mixed at home. He taped a piece of simuskin to the wall, made some sample strokes to satisfy himself that the spray widths were properly set.

"I'm ready," she announced with a fanfare. Clad in nothing but a pair of gold lamé hotpants, she did a handspring into the center of the room. Stelpart wolf-whistled. Then he tucked a transparent shield around her waist to keep the hotpants clean.

She stood on the table while he gave her legs an overall coating of white. Then he began to paint a neo-escapist version of Eve's serpent on her left leg. It was to be a green-and-gold serpent that wound three times around and ended with its forked tongue probing her inner thigh. He made his first slip about ten centimeters up from the tail. He swore, whited over the unwanted green streak, and set to work again. It took him nearly an hour to complete the job, and by that time she was starting to fidget.

"What's the matter, Laura? You know how I am today. I just don't have my steady hand."

She confessed to a mild case of jitters as she swung down to a seated position.

"It's going to be tough, Laura, but if you can hold still long enough, I think I can finish." There was still a great deal of work ahead of him. On her back and chest, he created an abstraction that suggested a tree's branches with her breasts as brown birds. Here there were slips also, but the composition permitted a fair margin for error. "Elements of chance," he called them.

When he was done, she raced to the mirror and declared her satisfaction. She stayed there awhile, doing knee exercises while he rested his tired back on the rug. His hands and arms were weary. He couldn't remember when he'd last felt so weak.

"Do you think they're going to feed

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us soon?" he asked. "I'll need an hour for your face afterwards."

"We're supposed to meet the President sometime before the main event. I know that much."

"No kidding?" He'd never met a President. Lots of celebrities but never a President. He found the notion surprisingly exciting. "Maybe you'd better get yourself ready then. Put on your own face to meet the President in, while I think about your hair." He got up, walked over to the boxes on the desk, and started to look for a suitable headpiece. "This is pretty close to what I want." He pointed to a mound of silver curls. "What do you say?"

"It looks right, Pete. I just wish I could sit still." She took out a handbag and began to apply color to her lips.

"Laura, you've got nothing to worry about. You're going to be the numero uno of the evening."

"I'll be happy if they just like me."

"*Like* you? They'll love you. I know it." He left her to her mirror and began to clean his pens. "Say, Laura, did you ever wonder if the President is a Klabber?" he asked as he popped out a paint cartridge and replaced it with a cartridge filled with solvent.

"The President? I never thought about it. It could be a bad thing, don't you think? I mean if his coordinates got out."

"You mean it might give the enemy an edge." He looked back at her. She turned from the mirror to consider the question.

"I remember something like that," she said. "There was an article in one of the Klab mags. You know the guy who shot Chesterton?"

"Yeah."

"He admitted to picking the day of the attack from Chesterton's biorhythms."

"Biorhythms?"

"Right. The old theory. He just started from Chesterton's birthdate and assumed a 23-day P-cycle. Lucky for Chesterton he was slightly off."

"Lucky all right. I guess if I were President and I were a Klabber I'd keep my setting to myself." Stelpart reached for another pen. "And you can bet I'd beef up the Secret Service guard on my critical days...."

His speculations were interrupted by the door tone. At the door stood a grey-haired man in a blue cap who announced that he would escort them to dinner.

"Ah-ha. They didn't forget that we folks eat too."

"We?" Laura complained. "I don't want anything but a glass of skim milk." She finished her face while Stelpart cleaned his last pen. Then she donned an elegant smearless robe, a full-length white-and-platinum model.

As they left the room, Stelpart began to get his first attack of butterflies. "Laura, I think your jitters are getting to me," he said as they followed the grey-haired escort into the elevator. The elevator rose quickly, giving his stomach a downward lurch.

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They were led to a small ballroom. At one end, a long table glittered with silver and crystal. The President and the First Lady, along with several unfamiliar people, were standing in a receiving line. The entertainers and their associates had formed a queue that stretched halfway across the room. Stelpart noted that the President was shorter than he looked on the vid, balder too. But the quick smile was there; its warmth crossed the room.

It struck Stelpart then, with full intensity, that Laura was finally getting the chance she deserved. She had worked hard, but recognition had been slow. If she was successful tonight, Stelpart knew her career would soar. He wanted that almost as much as she did. He could not predict, however, the effect of such success on their relationship with each other.

He looked again at the assembled parties. The President was still smiling. Two Secret Service men were stationed behind him and three stood facing the reception line. They wore blue suits with red carnations in their lapels. They were trying very hard to look casual.

Stelpart turned to watch the news crews scrambling for position as the entertainers were greeted and sent to the dining table. Their tape on Laura, he knew, would provide invaluable publicity if they chose to air it. In the high-ceilinged room, the crews had been able to deploy focusmikes on three-meter booms and periscopic cameras. Despite these advantages, however, their personnel were constantly jostling each other and the guests. To make things worse, they had left pieces of equipment scattered about the floor.

"Watch your step," Stelpart warned Laura as she nearly tripped on a cable. It would be a cruel stroke of fate, he reflected, for Laura to be the one to have an accident. She stepped over the cable and followed the queue. Stelpart kept watching for obstacles, wondering what could possibly go wrong. He felt that, clumsy as he was, he would have to be her protector for the next few hours.

Laura waved to a slim brunette in a red formal gown who was not far ahead of them. "It's Carol Kasami," she told him, "my new accompanist."

Stelpart nodded. He had assumed that she would have an accompanist somewhere, but hadn't thought to ask her whereabouts. He waved to Carol also, but his view of her was blocked by a camera crew. For some reason, the news personnel kept cutting across the queue of entertainers. This was particularly annoying. He didn't want to see a boom come crashing down on someone.

Now another group crossed in front of Laura, and when they had passed, someone came right up behind Stelpart. He turned and noticed that a soundman had paused to take apart a piece of his equipment.

The man was blocking the progress

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of those to his rear. A woman attired as a magician darted around the obstacle and came up to Stelpart. He saw then that the soundman had taken the grip off his boom; the I-shaped grip looked distinctly like a weapon. Was it a gun? Oh, no! Not that. Stelpart could feel Laura's universe collapsing.

The man pointed the thing at the President. It was definitely a gun. Stelpart shouted as he lunged past the magician in an attempt to knock the man down. Stelpart's foot caught on the boom that had been dropped to the floor. There were shots and he went down.

When he opened his eyes again, daylight was streaming through a real window onto his suspensor bed. The side of his ribcage ached and his head felt stuffed with paper. Laura and a short, chubby nurse were standing over him.

"What the hell?" Under his gown he found a lumpy bandage covering the center of pain. The faces, the window, the white flowers on the dresser, all seemed to be swimming. It was the kind of feeling he'd expect to have if he'd gone critical in every one of his components at the same time.

"To bad you missed the A.M. news," said the nurse with a wink.

"The President?" Stelpart was just starting to remember his last moment of consciousness.

"That flying leap you made saved him," said Laura. She was her unadorned self again, but her skin seemed to radiate from an inner source of light.

"I didn't make any flying leap. I tripped over that goddamn boom," Stelpart groaned. His head was starting to clear, but he still felt tired and weak.

"You knocked the man down," said Laura. "That's all that matters."

"And then?" He fingered the bandage again. "The shots?"

"You got hit by a stunner," said the nurse. "Secret Service. They send their regrets."

"Stunner, huh. I think it blew the hell out of my regulator."

"Your Klab system is going to need adjustment, Mr. Stelpart," the nurse replied. "The doctor will talk to you about it."

"And what about you, Laura?" He didn't want to admit he'd done it for her. He was satisfied to let her think he'd acted out of patriotism. "Did they cancel the show?"

"Oh, no." Her eyebrows arched into wishbones. "Everything went according to schedule. I was worried about you, but they said you'd be all right."

"I never finished your face." He stretched out a hand towards her cheek.

"I did it myself. It wasn't a Stelpart face ... but it was a face."

"So you danced for the President."

"They gave me a standing ovation!" Her smile was of one who still couldn't grasp her good fortune.

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"Numero uno," he said triumphantly. "I knew you could do it." He threw out both hands, winced at the pain as he stressed the wound. "Ouch!"

Laura turned to the nurse. "Could I see him alone for few minutes? It's important that I talk to him before he sees the doctor. About his readjustment."

The nurse nodded and stepped to the door. Stelpart could see that there was a crowd out there, but the nurse waved them back and they stepped out of the way. Someone snaked a perilens through the opening and took a quick photo before the door slid shut.

"I want to show you this," Laura said when they were finally alone. She pulled a folding chair close to the bed and sat down on it. "I asked Tad to run it off for you." She took out a two-page computer printout.

Stelpart stared at the sheets, not sure what to make of them. Part of it was his appointments calendar.

"You've got to be reset anyway," she said. "They can start you at *these* coordinates." She pointed to a table of numbers. "It won't be much harder than putting you back to where you were. And then we'll be in synch."

"*We?*" He was beginning to realize the significance of what she was showing him.

"You and I." She gave him a mischievous half-smile.

"All our components will match ... exactly ... all the time?"

She nodded.

He had heard of people doing that. Spaceflight crews, for example. In the arts, there were famous teams like Sastro and Tong. Synching was said to eliminate much of the friction that inevitably arises between people who spend much time together.

But there was more to it than that; there were advantages that transcended mere compatibility.

"So that's your proposal," he said with feigned disappointment. "I always hoped that *I'd* be the one doing the asking."

"Pete!" she chided. She put her warm forehead against his cheek. His nostrils filled with the scent of rose oil.

"Yes, Miss Stocking-foot," he said with a grin. "This wasn't quite the way I expected it to happen ... but you've got yourself a partner." He stretched out his arm again, this time ignoring the pain.

Then he drew her close to him and started to think about what lay ahead. The two of them, always in synch, riding the curves together. Dexterous together, fumble-fingered together. Bright together, dull together. Serious together, foolish together.

Working when they were high, staying in bed when they were low. Staying in bed *together*.

It seemed like a promising future.

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Eastcliff was dying of a disease that was impervious to modern medications. And so he found himself on a river of the planet known as Silver Dollar, heading upstream towards a remarkable clinic staffed by witch doctors with medical degrees.

The Tents of Kedar

BY

ROBERT F. YOUNG

Eastcliff had been on the river three days before there was any noticeable convergence of its distant banks. Even then he wasn't certain whether the river had really begun to narrow or whether his eyes were misinforming him. He needed tangible proof that the launch was moving upstream, not merely holding its own against the current, and what a man needs often influences what he sees — or what he thinks he sees — especially when he is dying.

There were times when Eastcliff found himself thinking of the river as a lake. The illusion was reinforced by the almost imperceptible current, bolstered by the middle - of - the - stream course he had fed into the A.P. so that he might remain as aloof as possible from the forested banks and the scattered Ebononese villages. His desire for privacy accrued in large part from his nature, but there was a practical reason behind it as well. Although the equatorial region of Silver Dollar could not properly be classified as a primitive wilderness, the bush country through which the river ran and on whose southern edge the Eastcliff plantation lay constituted relatively unknown territory; and although the Order of Chirurgeons, for want of an orthodox governmental body, functioned as an authority of sorts, the bush-blacks who swore fealty to it were for the most part only half civilized.

Eastcliff spent the long, hot days reading and remembering, wearing dark glasses to protect his sensitive eyes from the river's glare. He did not read evenings. He sat in the stern, distinguishable from the darkness only by the glowing ends of the cigarettes he smoked, listening to the throb of the launch engine and the susurrus of the wake, staring at the shifting star-pat-

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terns on the water. Increasingly of late he had been able to find beauty in the commonplace — in the symmetrical serrations of a leaf, in the shy pinkness that preceded the first rays of the morning sun, in the gray mists that materialized each evening and shrouded the distant banks.

On the fourth evening, as the launch was passing a promontory that was too insignificant to have triggered a course adjustment, the mists parted and a native *driuh* appeared. Four bush-blacks plied hand-carved paddles and a fifth manned a crude wooden tiller. In the prow a woman stood. She was tall and thin, and possessed the erect, almost rigid posture of her race. A bright red kerchief half hid her night-black hair and she carried a small crimson satchel in her right hand. She was wearing a calico half-skirt and halter; sandals woven of yellow filamentous reeds encased her feet.

She waved to Eastcliff, who was leaning on the port rail smoking a cigarette. He did not wave back, but stared coldly down at the *driuh* and its Ebononese occupants, trying to analyze an irrational *deja vu* which the woman had somehow evoked. The launch had not been built for speed, and the lean and muscular paddlers had no trouble pulling the *driuh* alongside and holding it in position by seizing the bottom bar of the rail. "I wish transportation to the clinic," the woman called up to Eastcliff. "You will be amply repaid."

He wasn't surprised that she knew his destination. The Eastcliff plantation employed bush-blacks recruited from all parts of Ebonon and was inextricably tied into the "bramblevine" that connected every village, every *biayau*, every farm in the territory. All Eastcliff, his ailing mother, his sister or his brother-in-law had to do was cough, and every bush-black in the country would know about it in a matter of hours. But although the woman knew he was going to the clinic, she could not possibly know why. Both the chirurgeons and the "bush-doctors" adhered rigidly to the equivalent of a Hippocratic Oath, and the bush-doctor whom Eastcliff had consulted and who, after diagnosing his illness, had radioed the clinic, would not have dreamed of violating his privacy.

"You will be amply repaid," the woman called up again when Eastcliff made no answer. "And I will not be in your way."

She spoke English excellently. Many bush-blacks found the language unconquerable. She had high, wide cheekbones, and their width was emphasized by the thinness of her cheeks. Her complexion was so utterly clear that the blue-blackness of her skin appeared translucent.

"I have no accommodations for a passenger," Eastcliff said.

"I will gladly sleep on the deck."

He sighed. The prospect of having his privacy invaded by a bush-black female dismayed him. But he couldn't

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risk offending a manifestly respected member of the race that supplied the laborers and the menials without which the Eastcliff Empire would languish and die. "Very well," he said at last. "You may come on board."

She tossed up her crimson satchel and he caught it and set it on the deck. Then, hiding his revulsion to the best of his ability, he reached down, gave her his hand and helped her climb over the rail. "Thank you," she said, straightening her half-skirt. "My name is Sefira."

The *driuh* dropped swiftly behind, turned and headed back toward the promontory. Eastcliff did not bother to divulge his own name; she undoubtedly knew it anyway. Carrying her satchel, he led the way below deck to the single cabin and set the satchel on the bunk. "You can sleep here. I have a comfortable deckchair that unfolds into a bed, and I much prefer to sleep in the open in any case."

The tone of his voice forbade argument. That, and the almost tangible aura of authority that covered him like a mantle. It was the famous Eastcliff authority, compounded of arrogance, opportunism and irresistibility, that had minted the seemingly worthless wilderness that the more favored *a* Andromedae VI colonials had spurned, and had given the planet its name.

He got blankets from the inbuilt bureau (the river nights were chilly), tossed two of them on the bunk and slung one over his shoulder. Then, aware of Sefira's gaze upon him, he turned reluctantly and faced her. He found himself looking into her eyes. They were black, but the blackness was alien to his experience. It was a four-dimensional blackness — it had to be — and he felt that he was gazing into infinite space; that although no stars were visible, thousands of them shone brightly just beyond the periphery of his gaze. But the analogy was unsatisfactory. Space connotated absolute zero — coldness and indifference. But here before him, commingled with a poignant *Weltschmerz* and glowing warmly in the night of his life, were compassion and human kindness of a dimension he had not dreamed existed; and here before him, too, half hidden in the deep darkness, was something else — a quality he knew well, yet could not recognize.

As he stood there staring into her eyes, *deja vu* smote him again, with such force this time that he nearly staggered. And suddenly he understood its cause: this woman — this blacker-than-black Ebononese from the bush, with her grotesque clothes and her primitive perfume, reminded him of his dead wife. It was impossible; it was execrable. But it was true.

Angrily he turned away. "Good night," he said. Then, remembering the thinness of her face: "The galley's next door if you're hungry."

"Thank you. I will have coffee ready when you awake."

* * *

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Every night when Eastcliff fell asleep it was like dying, because the odds were even that he would never awake. But he was used to dying; he had been dying now for weeks; and if it bothered him more than usual as he lay on the unfolded deckchair beneath the stars, it was because the clinic was so close. Because during his journey upstream he had weighed the skepticism with which the colonials regarded the curative powers of the chirurgeons and found it to be a product of apartheid and rumor rather than of fact. Because, through the persistent mists of his own skepticism, he perceived the possibility that these revered female witch doctors of the bush, these black Isoldes with their magic potions, *might* be able to accomplish that which orthodox medicine could not.

As he died and the stars went out, he dreamed as he always did of the summer of his life and of Anastasia wafting through it like a gentle wind, breathing through his castle window and enveloping him while he slept, permeating his life and softening the austerity of his existence. Mornings, she had brought him orange juice while he sat upon the patio gazing out over the dawn lawn; evenings, she had mixed martinis when the day's work was done. And every afternoon there had been tea — tea brewed as only she could brew it — dew-sweet, mellow, as golden as the sun.

She was awed by him when she first arrived at the plantation. His full name was Ulysses Eastcliff III; he owned, or would upon the death of his mother, one hundred thousand acres of rich river-silted land upon which fluorished, to the tune of four harvests a year, the farinaceous grain that constituted Silver Dollar's staff of life. But her awe of him, had she but known it, fell far short of his awe of her. It should not have. The Ebonon colonials were justifiably, if aggressively proud of the new country they had created so far from home and, mindful of the inequities of the past, were forever proclaiming that theirs was the ultimate in democratic societies; but no one knew better than he that they were lying in their teeth — that he, Eastcliff, was King. As such, he should have been totally unaffected by the beautiful commoner who stood before him, as indifferent toward her as though she had been made of clay.

He had not been. Looking into her gold-brown eyes, simultaneously seeing the swirls and undulations of her dark-red hair, he had found it impossible to believe that anything as earthly as an employment agency could be responsible for her presence in his office. She was fresh from the slopes of Olympus, the daughter of a modern-day Zeus, begot by him of the star-bedight maid of spring. And she was so young, so heart-breakingly, so poignantly young. It had frightened him that first time when he had seen his rude hands upon her smooth and flawless flesh, and he had been afraid that she would

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be repelled by his no-longer-youthful-body. She had not been. There had been no real reason for her to have been. He had but just turned forty, and he had been lean and hard, and he had not yet become host for the lethal schizomycetes of Meiskin's disease.

His atherosclerotic mother had resented Anastasia at first. The girl had no family, her background was vague. Surely such as she was no fit vehicle through which to perpetuate the Eastcliff name. Eastcliff's sister, too, had resented her in the beginning, while his brother-in-law had been cruelly contumelious — until Eastcliff took him behind the stables and beat him nearly to death. But in less than a month Anastasia won all of them over; as for Eastcliff, he had already toppled like a tall, gnarled oak. There had been women in his life — many of them — but they had been mere mistresses: the plantation had been his one true love. No more. Two months after Anastasia became his private secretary, she became his wife, and the night of his life had brightened to day.

Eastcliff came back from death at dawn. Sefira was already up and about. She had brewed coffee in the galley, and when she saw he was awake, she brought him a cup, smiling shyly. "Good morning."

The coffee didn't taste remotely like the kind he made. For this, he was grateful. It was strong, but not in the least bitter, and she had added just enough milk to color it. "How did you know I take no sugar?" he asked, sitting sideways on the deckchair, resting the cup on his knee.

"You look like the sort of man who mightn't."

"What sort of man is that?"

She smiled. "The sort of man like you."

The first rays of the rising sun, splashing suddenly upon the river and turning the gray deck of the launch to gold, brought out the intensity of her blackness, emphasizing that unanalyzable quirk of pigmentation that made the members of the Ebononese race seem not merely black but blue. Her skin glistened, and he realized she had bathed in the river while he still slept. Her black hair glistened too, falling, without a kerchief to restrain it, to her shoulders. It was freshly combed.

He saw how close the banks were: overnight, the river had narrowed to half its former width and the current had doubled in strength. He knew the clinic must be close. The bush-doctor who had diagnozed his illness and made an appointment for him had said when Eastcliff informed him he would travel by boat, "Not long after the river narrows you will come to an abrupt bend. The clinic is just beyond the bend. By now, a chirurgeon will already have been assigned to your case."

He did not need the information now; he had Sefira to guide him. It oc-

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curred to him that he hadn't asked her why she was going to the clinic. He did so.

"I work there," she said.

"Oh."

"And you?"

He saw no reason to hide the truth. "I have Meiskin's disease. It's not contagious," he added quickly.

"It is not incurable either."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because you act like a doomed man."

He regarded her silently for some time; then he drank the rest of his coffee and went below deck to wash up.

When he emerged from the lavatory he saw that Sefira had come down to the galley. "What would you wish to eat?" she asked.

"Nothing. I prefer to face my chirurgeon with an empty stomach and a clear mind."

"You will not find her that formidable."

"Do many colonials visit the clinic?"

"You will be the first."

He was surprised. "I find that hard to believe."

"You should not. It is very difficult for a man, even when he is dying, to seek help from a member of a race he considers, despite incontrovertible evidence to the contrary, to be different from and therefore inferior to his own. Even you, who are the first, have no doubt pinned your hopes upon the chirurgeons' putative magic rather than upon their knowledge of medicine."

"But they're *witch* doctors!"

"If you like. But they are witch doctors with medical degrees. Port D'argent is not the only spaceport on Silver Dollar."

"But they go into trances. They —"

"It is unfortunate so many wrong words have been applied to them."

"But they themselves applied the Ebononese word they're known by. And the only English word that fits it dates back to medieval times on Earth when wounded knights were cared for by ignorant noblewoman employing God knows what kind of techniques and medicines!"

"The Ebononese chirurgeons are neither ignorant nor noble. It is unfortunate that a more realistic translation could not have been made."

"I've even heard it said," Eastcliff said sardonically, "that they wear masks."

"You will see."

Deja vu racked him again, and he left the galley abruptly and returned to the deck. The banks were little more than half a mile apart now, and the current had again doubled in strength. The launch lumbered upstream like a pregnant water buffalo, its engine, revved up by the A.P. to meet the challenge, klonking rhythmically. He disliked traveling by air, and he had chosen the launch with comfort in mind rather than speed. He hadn't real-

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ly cared whether he ever reached the clinic, hadn't really believed that the potions of the chirurgeons would be any more effective against Meiskin's schizomycetes than the powerful antibiotics prescribed by his internist. He did not tell his family he had the disease, and when he set out for the clinic he said only that he was going fishing. His internist, when Eastcliff had visited him last, had given him three months. That was ten weeks ago. The launch, in all probability, would turn out to be his funeral barge.

The river continued to narrow but no abrupt bend appeared. Sefira had come back on deck, and Eastcliff could have asked her how much farther they had yet to go. However, he did not. She stood leaning against the starboard rail, gazing at the bank. Once, she waved to a group of bush-blacks walking single file along a trail that bordered the river. Apparently they knew her, for all of them waved back.

Toward midmorning, she said, "We are quite close now."

Looking up ahead, Eastcliff saw the bend. But he knew shame rather than relief. Meiskin's disease was endemic to Ebonon alone, but thus far only a few Ebonon colonials had contracted it. All of them, apparently, had had the courage to spurn the clinic and die in dignity in their own beds. All of them except him.

The launch, still keeping meticulously to the middle of the stream, began rounding the bend. On either side, towering trees, flashing with the multicolored patterns of parakeets in flight, extended frond-laden branches over the river, as though seeking to make contact. Inland, similar trees marched in serried battalions to low, grass-covered hills. Beyond the bend the river widened, and the hills receded into misty distances. On the right sprawled a bush-black village from whose waterfront a sturdy pier, lined with *driuhs*, protruded. It was no different basically from a dozen other native villages Eastcliff had seen: wretched huts haphazardly constructed of sticks and stones and vines, and roofed with overlapping fronds; a maze of narrow streets, no two of them running in the same direction. Only the clinic, rising beyond the bedlam of primitive buildings, made it distinguishable from its innumerable cousins of the bush.

"Clinic" was a misnomer. Dimensionally, at least, the institution more nearly corresponded to a hospital. By native standards, it was undoubtedly a modern, soul-satisfying edifice. By Eastcliff's, it was an architectural atrocity. The building material consisted almost exclusively of blue clay that had been dredged from the river bottom and molded into large rectangular blocks. Structurally, the building seemed sound enough, and the natural coloring supplied by the blocks was inoffensive to the eye; but it was painfully evident to Eastcliff that the builders had gone about their task without a

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vestige of a plan. From all indications, they had begun with a square, one-storied structure, amply large enough, no doubt, to have accommodated the chirurgeons' first patients. But as the patients multiplied, additions had been tacked on, stories added; and then, as the need for more and more space continued, additions had been added to additions and, in those cases where the foundations could support the extra weight, stories to stories. The result was a hodgepodge of conterminous structures, no two of them the same height, that sprawled back into the bush and out of sight and that exceeded the village in size.

Eastcliff docked without undue difficulty between two *driuhs*. Sefira had gone below; now she re-appeared on deck, wearing her bright red kerchief and carrying her crimson satchel. In her new surroundings, her calico half-skirt and halter seemed less grotesque.

A crowd had begun gathering on the pier. She paused by the rail, gazing into Eastcliff's eyes as though searching for something. Whatever it was, she did not seem to find it. "Thank you for bringing me upriver," she said. Then her eyes left his and she looked out over the people on the pier. "'I am black but comely,'" he thought he heard her murmur. "'As the tents of Kedar. As the curtains of Solomon.'" Her eyes lowered to the gathering crowd. "They are so curious — my people. That is because they are so empty. So hollow." She returned her eyes to his. "Thank you again for your kindness." She hesitated, then turned abruptly, climbed over the rail and stepped down to the pier.

"Good-by," he called after her, mildly surprised that she had not offered him money for her passage. He watched her make her way through the crowd, enter one of the village streets and disappear, and as he watched, *deja vu* overwhelmed him so utterly that his throat constricted and his vision blurred. It was as though he had just said good-by to Anastasia — not to a bush-black female whom he would probably forget before tomorrow.

Irony added itself to his distress, rendering it the more acute. For he had never said good-by to Anastasia — he had never had the chance. They had gone to sleep one night in each other's arms and he had awakened to find her gone. Gone from his bed, gone from his house, gone from his demesne. Half out of his mind when she did not return, he had contacted the territorial governor and ordered him to initiate a discreet search. The search yielded nothing in the matter of her whereabouts, but it yielded a number of unappetizing items concerning her past. She had arrived on Silver Dollar slightly more than a year ago and overnight had become the highest priced and most sought-after whore on the Port D'argent waterfront. Two months before she showed up in Eastcliff's office, she had abruptly forsaken her chosen profession, taken a speed course in sec-

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retarial work, provided herself with a fictitious and purposely ambiguous background, and registered with Port D'argent's only employment agency. It was as though she had known in advance that the job she presently obtained as Eastcliff's private secretary would be available.

Half numb from these blows, Eastcliff received yet another in the form of a bank statement. He had opened a $100,000 checking account in Anastasia's name: the statement showed she had written exactly one check for exactly that amount, converting it to cash. In the same mail he received a letter from Anastasia with no return address demanding that he deposit a second $100,000 in the account. He did so at once, then stationed himself in the bank's lobby, waiting for her to show up. He waited there every day for a week. In vain. Then news came of her in the form of an official report relayed to him through the governor's office. She had gone back into the bush to shack up with two bush-blacks and had been accidentally killed one night when they fought over her. When Eastcliff heard the news he got his crocrifle, hunted the two men down and blew both their heads off. There were no witnesses, and so the incident failed to make the bramblevine. But it made the governor's office by way of Eastcliff himself, and the governor decided that for the sake of the Eastcliff name and Port D'argent's interstellar reputation the Anastasia affair should be "cosmetized." The bodies of the two bush-blacks were secretly cremated, that of Anastasia given to Eastcliff for private burial, while information was inserted in the Port D'argent Police Department files and given to the Port D'argent *Spacetimes* to the effect that Anastasia, after obtaining an annulment of her marriage, had left Silver Dollar on a ship bound for Earth.

But although Eastcliff had escaped juridical justice, he had not escaped poetic justice. Less than a month after murdering Anastasia's two lovers, he discovered he had Meiskin's disease.

A tall bush-black wearing a blue ankle-length cowl and reed sandals emerged from the crowd on the pier and approached the launch. His wrinkled face was thin, his black eyes cold and uncompromising. "Ulysses Eastcliff?"

Eastcliff nodded.

"A room awaits you at the clinic. As you already know, a chirurgeon has been assigned to your case. If you will accompany me —"

Eastcliff went below deck, packed a few personal items in a small bag, returned topside, closed and locked the hatch and joined the blue-cowled man on the pier. The latter led the way through the crowd, and presently they entered one of the village streets. There were naked children underfoot, and half-naked mothers with sagging breasts watched from dark doorways,

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some of them nursing their young.

Viewed up close, the clinic was even less prepossessing than when viewed from afar. A flagstone walk crossed an expanse of sun-bleached sward to a porte-cochere as unsightly as it was unnecessary, and a crude double-door gave into a featureless foyer. Beyond the foyer, however, the complexion of the clinic changed. The corridor down which the blue-cowled man led Eastcliff had been scrubbed till walls and floor and ceiling seemed to emanate a bluish glow. Illumination was provided by primitive fluorescent tubes inset in the ceiling. Immaculate white doors interrupted the walls at regular intervals. Most of them were open and gave glimpses of neat, square rooms furnished with bed, cabinet and chair. Each bed contained a bush-black patient. Some were supine; others were sitting up, apparently on the way back to recovery.

Young bush-black women wearing green caps and green knee-length dresses were making the morning rounds, some of them carrying trays of medications. They appeared to be modern medications, and no doubt were — products, probably, of one of the pharmaceutical laboratories of a neighboring province. But they left him unimpressed. Modern medications did not necessarily imply a modern hospital.

The point was academic in any case. Meiskin's disease was impervious even to ultramodern medications.

A tall bush-black woman clad in blue passed Eastcliff and his escort, and Eastcliff knew without needing to be told that she was one of the chirurgeons. She wore a hood rather than a cap, and her gown fell all the way to her ankles. A veil-like gauze mask covered her nose and mouth and chin, its immaculate whiteness in sharp contrast with the rest of her attire. It was true, then, about the masks. What wasn't true was the widely circulated rumor that the masks were on the order of the grotesque affairs worn in olden days by Afro witch doctors.

At the corridor's end, a stairway right-angled upward to a low-ceilinged second story. Eastcliff had to stoop to enter the room to which the blue-cowled man conducted him. Like the others he had seen, it contained a bed, a cabinet and a chair. A refuse container stood beside the bed. Wearily he sat down on the chair; when he looked back at the doorway he saw that the blue-cowled man had been supplanted by a timid girl wearing a green cap and a green dress.

Diffidently she asked him to undress and don the hospital gown she had brought. He obeyed, hiding to the best of his ability the revulsion her nearness evoked in him. He did not fool her any more than he had fooled Sefira. He sat on the side of the bed and she took a sample of his blood from his right arm. He saw that her hands were trembling and realized that she was terrified of him. When she fin-

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ished she said in a trembling voice, "The chirurgeon that is assigned to you will come see you as soon as analysis is been made." She almost ran from the room.

He lit a cigarette, smoked for a while, then threw the butt on the floor. He lay back on the bed, covered himself with its single sheet and clasped his hands behind his head. He stared up at the scrubbed blue ceiling, realizing how tired, how exhausted he was. The river journey had consumed what little energy the Meiskin schizomycetes had left him. The brightness of the still-cool morning came through the room's only window, and the ceiling reflected it into his eyes, sending splinters of pain into his retinas. He had removed his dark glasses upon entering the clinic; but he did not bother to get them out of his coat on the chair beside the bed. Instead he continued to stare masochistically up at the ceiling. Hypersensitivity to light was the prelude to the blindness that in turn was the prelude to the death that came seconds later. Meiskin, after isolating his precious bacterium, had dealt lovingly with the inexorable progression of the disease in a learned paper in a learned journal that learned researchers like himself subscribed to. His face was assured. Like Raynaud's, like Addison's, like Parkinson's....

Eastcliff must have slept. The morning coolness had given way to the asphyxiating warmth of midday, and he was no longer alone in the room. Just within the doorway, a statue stood — tall, blue-gowned, white-masked. And above the mask, black depths of eyes into which he had gazed before.

Sefira.

She walked over to the bed with that effortless grace of hers and took his pulse with long, cool fingers. "Why?" he demanded. "Why didn't you tell me you were my chirurgeon?"

She did not look into his eyes. "If I had, would you have continued your journey?"

"No."

"So I did not tell you."

"What were you doing in the bush?"

"All chirurgeons live in the bush. It is our home. I live near where you took me on board."

"And you commute by *driuhs?*"

"We reside here at the clinic except on our days off; then we depend on *driuhs*. Yesterday was my day off. Yesterday evening, you came along."

He said, "You knew I was coming, didn't you."

"Yes, of course. I had been assigned to you, had I not? And now I have good news for you. The tests we made of your blood show conclusively that the vaccine series was successful."

"What vaccine series?"

Without answering, she withdrew an ampule from a pocket of her gown and rolled up his right sleeve. He felt a faint prick; a moment later she tossed the empty ampule into the waste container by the bed. "That was the first of

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the supplementary injections. There will be seven more, which my assistants will administer at two and one-half hour intervals. A spinal tap will then be made, but it will be routine. By tomorrow morning, you will be cured."

"That's preposterous! Meiskin's disease can't be cured overnight!"

"According to your colonial doctors, it cannot be cured at all. Besides, I did not say it could be cured overnight. Be patient. In the morning, the administrator will explain everything to you. Now, I must go."

In the doorway, she paused and looked back at him. Looked, for the first time since entering the room, into his eyes. Looking back into hers, he knew once again, during the brief interval before she turned and vanished down the corridor, the depth and breadth of them; the *Weltschmerz* and the boundless compassion — and, yes, the love she bore him. And knew something else as well. They were the eyes of a saint.

The blue-cowled man sat alone in the ground-floor room to which Eastcliff had been directed. Only a desk, patterned with a parellelogram of morning sunlight, indicated that the room was an office. The blue-cowled man sat behind the desk. He motioned Eastcliff into a chair opposite him.

"How do you feel?"

"Reborn," Eastcliff said.

The blue-cowled man handed him a small sealed envelope. "It is from Sefira. There is no need for you to read it now. It will be better if you wait till you are on the river."

"Where is she?"

"She has returned to her home in the bush. The chirurgeons' code is a rigid one. It does not countenance a chirurgeon's falling in love with a patient. When this occurs, she must confess her transgression to her superiors and disqualify herself. Yours was Sefira's last case."

Eastcliff said coldly, "What manner of a woman would fall in love with a man the moment she set eyes on him?"

"It did not happen quite that way. This will become clear to you presently.

"Our name for the malady that afflicted you is 'Blinding Light.' Back here in the bush we have been coping with it successfully for generations, although the identity of its carrier continues to remain unknown to us. Were the results not so tragic, we would find it amusing indeed that a silly scientist from Earth should have presumed to give it his name and have pronounced it uncurable.

"Beginning at the age of five and continuing to the age of twenty, all Ebononese are periodically given an oral vaccine. There are a few, of course, who out of superstitious fear hide from our bush-doctors and contract the disease in later life, but even in these cases it isn't fatal because we are blessed with our chirurgeons. A

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chirurgeon preincarnates herself in the body of the victim, if sex permits, or in the body of someone close to the victim, if sex does not, and administers the equivalent of the vaccine series before the victim contracted the disease. The victim will still contract it, not only because a paradox would be involved if he didn't but because a vaccine series administered over the space of a few months isn't as effective as one administered over the usual fifteen-year period. Thus, the series must be supplemented later on by a series of injections — 'booster shots,' you would call them. Meanwhile, although the symptoms continue to be present, the damage done will be negligible.

"This ability of the chirurgeons to project themselves mentally — spiritually, if you prefer — back in time is an inborn gift. Ebononese men are never born with it, and only a few Ebononese women. It is limited in that the chirurgeon can take over only the mind and body of a member of her own sex and in that her maximum preincarnation range is considerably less than an *a* Andromedae VI year. But this still enables her to treat or pretreat all diseases retroactively, including Blinding Light. In your case, as often happens, one of our bush-doctors made the diagnosis; thus Sefira, the moment she was assigned to you, had merely to preincarnate herself in the body of someone closely enough associated with you to enable her to incorporate the vaccine series in your food and drinks. The vaccine itself she obtained by courier from the clinic. In effect, you were cured before you came here, even though your symptoms still persisted. Yesterday and last night, you received the booster shots."

"In *whose* body?" Eastcliff said hoarsely.

"In this respect, Sefira's task was somewhat difficult. Your mother would not do: she simply wasn't well enough. Your sister had to be ruled out because of the demands made upon her by her husband. So Sefira had to employ the body of an outsider. She was forced, finally, to make use of a prostitude named —"

"No!" Eastcliff shouted, half rising from his chair.

The blue-cowled man shrugged. "Very well, I will not mention your ex-wife's name. It isn't relevant in any case. What is relevant is that preincarnation can be sustained for only a limited length of time. Such 'trances,' as our people insist upon calling them, are extremely exhausting. Objectively, they endure for only several hours, but subjectively the chirurgeon experiences the same time interval as that of the person she inhabits. So you see, even if the chirurgeons' code had permitted Sefira to remain in your wife's body, she couldn't have done so. She *had* to return to the present.

"We are not gods, and we can't change the past. What was, was. What is, is. Nevertheless, before a chirurgeon is permitted to preincarnate her-

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self in a person's body, we run a check on the post-preincarnation history of that person. Thus we knew — know — that after Sefira's departure from your wife's body, your wife obtained an annulment and left the planet. This is regrettable, but —"

Eastcliff was on his feet, gripping the edges of the desk. "You know nothing!" he screamed. "Nothing but lies!"

"We know what the records tell us," the blue-cowled man continued unperturbedly. "If something befell your wife that they don't tell, we can hardly be held responsible. We could not be in any case, because whatever happened had already happened. As I said, we are not gods. We are healers. Nothing more, nothing less. Sefira erred in permitting her host to marry you. But, you see, she couldn't have done otherwise because in one sense her host had *already* married you. Her real error — if it can be called that — was in falling in love with you, something she didn't foresee. All she meant to do, as your secretary and later as your wife, was to administer the vaccine series and save your life."

"Then why didn't she *tell* me!" Eastcliff cried.

"Why didn't she indeed! If she had said to you, 'Beneath this ethnically beautiful exterior so dear to your ethnocentric heart lies the soul of a bush-black witch doctor come to cure you of a disease you have yet to contract,' what would your reaction have been?"

Eastcliff flung his chair across the room. "Damn your sanctimonious clinic! Damn your sanctimonious soul!" He threw money on the desk, handfuls of it, and walked out.

On the river, moving downstream in the lingering morning coolness, beneath the green overhanging fronds, Eastcliff felt his anguish fade to a faint but throbbing pain. He opened Sefira's letter.

Now all has been made clear to you. Except why I met you on the river. I wanted to see you one more time as a woman; I could not help myself. For this, I must be forgiven, for I was, for an entire month, your wife. I am the part of her that loved you, but not the part you loved.

There is a pier at the tip of the promontory near where you took me on board. A path leads up from it through the bush to my house. If you would care to stop by on your way home, I will have hot coffee waiting for you on the stove. —Sefira

The path was narrow, wound senselessly among the trees, through bramblevines laden with red, red berries. Eastcliff smelled forest flowers, the morning dampness of the underbrush. He smelled smoke, and presently he glimpsed the house through the low-hanging foliage of the trees. It was a small house, hardly more than a hut. He had seen a thousand such. There

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would be a wood stove, a table and a chair. Perhaps two chairs. The floor would be dirt. He halted behind the final fringe of trees.

He pictured her sitting by the window in her cheap calico half-skirt and halter. Waiting. He saw the pot of coffee steaming on the stove. He realized that his hands were trembling, and he thrust them into his coat pockets to still them.

I am black, but comely ... as the tents of Kedar, as the curtains of Solomon —

Look not upon me because I am black —

Because the sun has scorched me....

A pebbled path lined with whitewashed stones led up to the door. To all that was left of Anastasia. He would say to his mother, in the coolness of the stately Eastcliff portico, "Look, I have brought her back. She did not die after all." To his sister, "Behold! the real Anastasia!" And they would stare down their broad aristocratic noses, and in the graveyard beyond the garden his father would turn in the black earth, bare bones groaning, outraged hubris flaming fiercely in the eyeless sockets of his skull. And the household bush-blacks would peer through the windows in exalted consternation and the bramblevine would vibrate with the earth-shaking implication of the news.

He turned his back on the hut and retraced his steps to the pier. Aboard the launch again, his homeward journey resumed, he sat listlessly in his deckchair, staring at the dark brown water. He did not eat. The day passed swiftly; mists materialized along the ever-receding banks. Night fell, and he went on sitting there, distinguishable from the darkness only by the glowing ends of the cigarettes he smoked.

He had no son. Soon, his best years would be behind him. Probably there would never be a Ulysses Eastcliff IV. So be it. No bush-black nigger was going to be the instrument of perpetuating the Eastcliff name.

Not even the one who had given him his life, who loved him as deeply as he still loved the poor dead whore whose soul she once had been. The launch slipped smoothly through the blackness of the night; the river whispered in its wake. Above, the stars shone coldly down.

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